

Abstract

Title of dissertation: VISA DENIED: U.S. PLAYWRITING AND THE ANTI-POLITICAL HABITUS POST-*ANGELS IN AMERICA*

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This dissertation argues that an anti-political prejudice operates across the points of the U.S. theater-making spectrum, with particularly inhibiting results for playwrights even in the two decades following Tony Kushner's influential political epic. Using a reception framework suggested by Susan Bennett and others, along with the memory and "ghosting" ideas of Marvin Carlson and Diana Taylor, the dissertation suggests unrecognized anti-political patterns in criticism and production, explores broken links with the traditions of the 1930s and the lost lessons of workers' theater movements from the 1920s and 1930s, and contrasts contemporary American and British practice and reception by examining dramatic technique in plays by David Hare, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Arthur Miller and Wendy Wasserstein. The project acknowledges the absorption of political energy on the stage by the rising documentary forms since the emergence of solo performer Anna Deavere Smith, concluding that the acceptance and dominance of fact-based methods, while expanding the drama's vocabulary, contributes to an even greater outsider position for the playwright as political thinker.

VISA DENIED: U.S. PLAYWRITING AND THE ANTI-POLITICAL HABITUS
POST-ANGELS IN AMERICA

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2013

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Chapter One
Shooting Bullets, Shooting Blanks:
Politics and the Horizon of Expectations

In the early 1990s, the phenomenal theatrical emergence of Tony Kushner and *Angels in America* appeared to declare a revitalized potency for the popular political play. The amusing and passionate *Angels* was unabashedly Shavian – the subtitle, “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” directly invoked the *Heartbreak House* subtitle “A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes” – and its two-part, seven hour length both demanded and assumed political fluency from audiences.

Yet the political drama in America has languished in the two decades since *Angels* became a cornerstone of the canon. In fact, an active anti-political prejudice can be seen undermining politically minded U.S. dramatists at multiple points in the complex apparatus of modern theater-making. The question of which playwrights are “licensed” to write politically, and when and where in the American theater-making culture (wherein playwrights have very little power – the concept of “agency” as applied to playwrights is, as will be shown, extremely problematic), is troublingly under-considered. The intent of this dissertation is to examine a poetics of political drama, considering the forms and

reception of contemporary American political playwriting post-*Angels* and seeking the roots of an anti-political pattern in American playwriting – distinct from collaborative, devised, or journalistically-oriented stage works – since the provocatively coterminous premieres in 1991 of Kushner’s aggressively political opus and Anna Deavere Smith’s verbatim *Fires in the Mirror*. “We live in a time when new art works should shoot bullets,” Clifford Odets wrote in 1939. More than seventy years later, U.S. playwrights – responding to discouragement that is deep and systemic – have been critically disarmed or have voluntarily put down the gun.

Kushner’s two-part *Angels* is widely taught, anthologized and revived (demonstrated by the critically celebrated sellout revival off-Broadway in 2010-11), and it is routinely acclaimed as the masterpiece of its generation. Yet its influence, as even Kushner implicitly acknowledged in a subsequent essay, has been minimal in terms of inspiring U.S. dramatists to write plays as direct political speech in Kushner’s mode or in any of the modes he re-activates, including those of Arthur Miller, Brecht and Shaw. Despite a vigorous tradition of directly engaging public policy and governance, the realm of politics frequently seems like terra incognita for contemporary American playwrights. This is perplexing, particularly in an age of increased public political discourse – an increase that is readily demonstrable in the reportage, commentary and breaking news streaming at all hours. The heavy, continuous flow of political content saturating traditional and new media hardly renders political drama irrelevant, outdated as of the latest Tweet or late-night jokes, as critics sometimes suggest (a claim that will be challenged by the vibrant exercise of politic license on the contemporary British stage, in Chapter 3). Instead, such elevated levels of information and public dialogue may be seen

as increasing the theater's possibilities as an alternative and potentially nuanced site for responding and contributing to an ever more politically literate society, fulfilling a traditionally "pedagogic function," as Kushner has put it. Such a function would meet one of Hallie Flanagan's foundational definitions for the stage as she ran the Depression era Federal Theatre Project: "It [theater] is a necessity because in order to make democracy work the people must increasingly participate; they can't participate unless they understand; and the theater is one of the great mediums of understanding" (Flanagan 372).

This project will explore the limits placed on American political playwriting from several angles:

- The tradition of issue-driven drama that emerged in the early 20th century and flourished in the 1930s as American playwriting matured;

- The sustained aggressive contemporary political theater of the British, abetted by the apparatus of the National Theatre and incarnated by playwright David Hare's trilogy for that company, coterminous with Kushner's and Smith's seminal pieces;

- The demonstrable American anti-political prejudice, manifested in production decisions and patterns of reception, but also visible in a formal crisis of political playwriting that can be seen in several works by America's foremost dramatists – David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Arthur Miller, Wendy Wasserstein – in the period after Kushner's landmark *Angels*.

The suggestion is that Kushner's epic text – in which his recognizable contemporary characters are bracingly articulate about current events, history and political philosophy, which largely adopts the realist mode (the drama's fever dreams and

hallucinations notwithstanding), and in which cultural/identity politics and governmental critique effectively intersect and form an immediate resistant comment on the political moment – has yielded few American imitators. Instead, the political in this country has taken refuge in (largely) new stage manifestations of the “real,” in the nascent verbatim/documentary forms refined by Anna Deavere Smith (and, slightly earlier, by Emily Mann, as well as by a tide of 1990s-2000s works in Great Britain, with obvious roots in the Federal Theatre Project’s 1930s Living Newspapers and in European workers’ theaters before that) and practiced ever more widely in the years since Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror*, which surfaced at the same cultural moment as (while subsequently wielding more formal influence than) Kushner’s play.

The study will seek a functional definition for the term “political,” taking Kushner’s practical claims as foundational while recognizing the theoretical and practical complications and lessons of Brecht, Boal and early twentieth century workers’ theaters. The project will also explore the themes of “ghosting” and the repetition of and variations on history as established in Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* and Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire*, with an appropriation of Taylor’s concept of “visa” – the cultural license granted or revoked to certain groups for particular modes of expression. The study will define the “license,” roughly interchangeable with Taylor’s “visa,” that Kushner claims and that many others are denied, using his *Angels* companion piece *Slavs! or Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1994) as a pragmatic example of the application and limits of Kushner’s theories. “License” will refer here to the right, whether claimed (as by Kushner and Arthur Miller) or renounced (as by Lillian Hellman and David Mamet), to

write politically. Additionally, in acknowledging the “social constitution” of the theatrical event, as Bennett puts it, the study will utilize Hans Robert Jauss’s “horizon(s) of expectations,” following methods set out by Bennett, to consider the perplexing American response to politics on stage.

“Politics”

It is necessary at the outset to distinguish “political theater” from “political playwriting,” for while there is a certain amount of the former – in collectively-driven works, devised works, documentary/verbatim works, etc. – the latter is commonly treated with open hostility (as will be argued in Chapter Two). The idea of the “political playwright” has slouched into conspicuous disfavor in the U.S. “I am vexed and challenged by the difficulties of representing political struggle on stage without embarrassing everyone,” Kushner writes (Fisher 208). The dearth of active American practitioners poses definitional difficulties even as broad claims are routinely made for a political function for the stage. “From Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare,” Emily Mann writes in the preface to *Political Stages: Plays That Shaped a Century*, “to Kushner, Marc Wolf, and Adrienne Kennedy – from poetic drama to documentary theatre – the great plays of an age are invariably the political plays of that age” (Mann v). “All theater is political,” claims James Patterson on the opening page of *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (2003). Partly owing to the public nature of performance, Patterson continues, “Indeed, it is the most political of all art forms” (1). Yet Kushner’s essay, “Notes About Political Theater,” which usefully describes the

pitfalls of writing directly on issues, is typical in its frustrated imprecision about describing exactly what “political theater” is. “The political, in one sense, is a realm of conscious intent to enter the world of struggle, change, activism, revolution, and growth,” Kushner writes (26).

Jeanne Colleran and Jenny Spencer, in the collection *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, wrangle with the instability of the category of “political theater,” reporting that as they recruited essayists the heading was “for some commodious and for others uselessly ambiguous . . . But what counts as political theater, how and if it can hold the line against political reaction, can remain an open question only if the category itself remains relevant” (Colleran 1). Like many, if not most, scholars addressing the subject, they begin with the shadow of Bertolt Brecht, noting that Brecht’s theories of the epic and the *Verfremdungseffekt* lie behind “the discussion and practice of political theater” (2). The contributions of Erwin Piscator and anti-naturalist agit-prop are acknowledged, then the authors gesture toward contemporary complications (“thinking of political theater as a cultural practice that self-consciously operates at the level of interrogation, critique, and intervention, unable to stand outside the very institutions and attitudes it seeks to change”) that include postmodern thought and media influences that may render the effects of any political theater practically “undecidable.” The assurance to the reader is that despite grave definitional misgivings, the editors instructed their essayists to presume the existence of a discussable political theater anyway (2-3).

Complicating the definitional problem is the lack of a clear body of contemporary American work filling the void that Kushner laments. “There is little evidence today that dramatists are considered spokespeople for anything other than their own work. The

entire field wrestles with its own irrelevance,” Todd London writes in his 2010 study of American playwriting conditions, *Outrageous Fortune* (247). Disengagement with the most obvious kind of politically committed writing, confusion over exactly what constitutes a political play, and, perhaps most vexing, an almost ritual disavowal of political playwriting as a positive or even legitimate presence on the American stage: these are the ingredients that contribute to a forbidding social horizon of expectations for American political playwriting. The result is a field lacking a serious discourse about political writing, and a field in crisis regarding theatrical language for dramatists taking aim at what Miller all but patented in this country as “the social.”

Yet a long tradition of such writing exists, and the memory of the theater artist – usually, but not always, the playwright – engaged in social protest is one of the most powerful images deposited into the American theatrical archive. Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), produced by John Houseman and directed by Orson Welles, is part of the long roster of popular mainstream works challenging the socio-economic status quo, and the high drama surrounding its opening casts a particularly long shadow. The Federal Theater Project production was branded as a leftist threat and ordered closed by the government; Welles’s company famously responded by marching to an empty theater, gathering an audience from the streets along the way, and performing from the house – a “scenario,” to use Diana Taylor’s term from *The Archive and The Repertoire*, reactivated and embellished by the Tim Robbins film *Cradle Will Rock* (1999). This “archive” is thick with examples/images of American theater, forged in the 1930s and reinforced in the 1950s, addressing the body politic and performing resistance.

Consider America's two most recognizable post-war playwrights, who found it impossible not to be touched, if not formed, by this crusading mold. The young (age 27) Tennessee Williams intuitively used the stage to muckrake, working from a shocking case history and indicting prison conditions in *Not About Nightingales*, the 1938 work (which he submitted, without success, to the Group Theatre) that preceded the more slyly subversive, against-the-grain dramas for which he became renowned. Miller, though he wrote in a number of modes before fully breaking into public view, worked with the FTP in the 1930s, and emerged with his own muckraking indictments *All My Sons* (which attacked corporate corruption) in 1947 and *Death of a Salesman* (capitalist ethics and economic imbalances) in 1949. "The play could reflect what I had always sensed as the unbroken tissue that was man and society, a single unit rather than two," Miller wrote of *Salesman*, adding of the "austere" and "elevated" death title:

Now it would be claimed by a joker, a bleeding mass of contradictions, a clown, and there was something funny about that, something like a thumb in the eye, too. Yes, and in some far corner of my mind possibly something political; there was the smell in the air of a new American Empire in the making, if only because, as I had witnessed, Europe was dying or dead, and I wanted to set before the new captains and the so smugly confident kings the corpse of a believer. On the play's opening night a woman who shall not be named was outraged, calling it "a time bomb under American capitalism"; I hoped it was, or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of

a refrigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last
(*Timebends* 182-184).

The political vilification of Miller and other writers during the Red Scare years of the 1950s and their ritual summoning (and in some cases, their resistance) before Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee contributes another lasting scenario to the archive of images surrounding the playwright. The public drama was clear: to cooperate, or not to cooperate? Miller and Hellman remain lionized for not naming names before a congress so intent on rooting out Communists that, in 1939, one member famously inquired of Hallie Flanagan if the Christopher Marlowe she mentioned might be a fellow traveller (Flanagan 342). Hellman penned perhaps the most penetratingly resistant line of the decade as she submitted a letter to the committee that read, "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to suit this year's fashions." Miller, in response to the harsh political climate and anticipating the committee's shenanigans (he was summoned four years later), in 1952 wrote *The Crucible*.

These are powerful ghosts, as defined by Marvin's *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Carlson, building on ideas of director-performance theorist Herbert Blau and literary theorist Joseph Roach, quotes Blau: "The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection." Working through Roland Barthes's ideas of intertextuality and the reception theory/"horizon of expectations" of Hans Robert Jauss, Carlson establishes the operation of what he calls a "repository of memories," which is not unlike Taylor's idea of archive

and repertoire. In short, that which we have seen before, we expect to see again, refreshed by alterations and variations. Carlson sees as foundational the intertextuality principle that “Every new work may also be seen as a new assemblage of material from old works” (Carlson 3). He cites Barthes, from *Image, Music, Text*: “We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the ‘message’ of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (end-noted, 4). Carlson accepts intertextuality as fundamental to what we think of as literacy, an understanding built on memory and recognition of familiar patterns, refreshed and reorganized. This leads to a focus on reception: on Jaus and the horizon of expectations, which, through a combination of social, cultural, literary and other factors necessarily frames the possibilities of meaning for a given work and its reader/audience, and Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities,” or bodies of culturally informed/conditioned readers/audiences equipped to respond to a given work. These theories, Carlson contends, rely on an overlay of memory selectively applied to experience. Works outside audience memory fall outside audience expectations, but most operate within, and thus add to the repository of memories (6).

Carlson’s term for such memory operations in the theater is *ghosting* – something the audience has seen before, but that now appears in a different context (7). Carlson argues that familiarity of form is a driving force in the highly traditional Japanese and Chinese theaters, a tradition not so familiar in the west in part because the Romantic movement prized individualism, genius, and originality (“An ideal now almost totally discredited by postmodern theory and thought,” 11). The history of “ghosting” is long,

and Carlson invokes Derrida: “Among all literary forms it is the drama preeminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public” (17).¹ Aristotle’s *Poetics*, among other theories, allows for new stories but privileges the familiar as more probable, accepted, and verifiable (18-21). For Carlson, the fact that a storyline is well-worn should be appealing to writers, who have evidence that audiences have already found appeal in the tale’s contours (23) – an idea with valence in Jaus and in Susan Bennett’s reception theories, as well as in the programming choices of theaters (even the not-for-profit variety) calculating how to meet budgets and bottom lines. The comparative brevity of the drama compels efficiency, which is why Greek drama favored a late point of narrative attack. These factors contribute to what Carlson calls an “ease of reception” (23). Though it is not part of Carlson’s argument, this “ease of reception” – ghosting theatrical and public history, engaging with familiar public topics – would seem to be of particular interest to writers dramatizing political matters (and thus presumably hoping to engage and persuade the greatest possible numbers of viewers).

The problems with Carlson’s theory include one that he frequently acknowledges: that the modern ethos (to say nothing of contemporary critical attitudes, which arguably intensify the disposition) privileges individual originality over the formula of familiarity made artful by variation. Further, the dominance of realism in Western drama severely hampers comparisons with the closely held forms and patterns of Eastern theater and even with much U.S. and British theater practice through the 19th century, practices that capitalized on the creative recycling of everything from roles and genres to the public personas of well-known actors. Carlson repeatedly resorts to disclaimers as he butts up

against modern times: “The close connection between a popular actor and an often-revived vehicle role is less common in the twentieth century, particularly in the American commercial theater, in which the nineteenth century practice of frequent revivals has been replaced by the single long run” (66). More: “This attitude [lines of business, etc.] toward acting and performance memory may seem a bit odd, even unnatural, to a theatergoer in modern America, within a theatrical culture that places relatively little value on either memory or tradition” (82). “In more modern times, in which theoretical, aesthetic, and even legal concerns are often allied against the practice of ‘passing down’ a specific costume from production to production, such recycling is generally even more negatively considered” (129). “Ghosting generated by the repeated use of a certain physical space has much diminished in the modern commercial theater” (162). The contemporary practitioners who actually embrace “ghosting,” Carlson writes, are the postmodernists who do so self-consciously, appropriating and re-forming *à la* the Wooster Group, the principle subject of Carlson’s final chapter.

Still, if the essence of “ghosting” is an intertextuality that is inseparable from literacy in combination with a semiotic culture in which practically no space is innocent,² the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may not be as resistant to the concept as Carlson suggests, even if the patterns he tracks begin to thin. It may be argued that what Carlson explores continues to be an intuitive, possibly even elemental component of reception that is second nature to artists, audience, and critics. In the Feb. 12, 2010 *New York Times*, critic Alistair Macaulay responded to choreographer Christopher Wheeldon’s *Ghosts*, a dance which deployed the kind of ghosting described by Carlson. Wheeldon appropriated movements from at least four choreographers that Macaulay recognized:

George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Frederick Ashton, and Kenneth MacMillan, “sometimes verbatim, sometimes adapted.” Macaulay continues:

All of this – even the quotations that at first look most derivative – is perfectly fine. Mr. Wheeldon chooses a different palette of new and borrowed movement in each composition, and he’s no clone. “Ghosts” would be a good title for all of his work: everything he has made to date is powerfully haunted by dead choreographers, and usually it’s a pleasure to recognize his sources, if you can (Macaulay “Wheeldon’s”).

This intertextual hunt for influences and creative fingerprints is also closely related to film’s auteur theory, of course, in which wildly disparate films in a director’s *oeuvre* can be ghosted by that director’s historic tics, techniques and bows to forerunners.

Taylor’s archive is akin to ghosting in its reliance on cultural memory (which, like Carlson’s theory, depends upon an initiated and literate audience). However, Taylor announces her focus as less concerned with western and North American logocentricity and more driven by historical and contemporary public actions (viewed as “performances”), its frame of reference more anthropological and ethnographic. Taylor’s overall thesis is concerned with staking out territory for performance as an analytical site, and the trigger is often particular contested cultural territories and the shifting of meanings as borders are blurred – deliberately as she examines *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . .*, with Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco ironically performing as aborigines in a cage, and mysteriously as Taylor analyzes the intercontinental reverberations of Diana Spencer’s death. “Repertoire” is an action, an

incident, something performed. The “archive,” on the other hand, is the less changeable, but not *unchangeable*, repository of materials and potential materials from which the repertoire is drawn. For Taylor, performance, like identity as argued by Judith Butler, is drawn from a limited stock of already understood possibilities. The potential for originality and change arrives in the specific performance, the push and pull between a particular new embodiment and its primary form. “The scenario makes visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes,” Taylor writes (28). Taylor acknowledges the risk of stereotyping, but suggests that there is room for friction between familiar roles and the social actors themselves (29).

Taylor’s idea of ghost, shadows, historical memory activated by embodiment is perhaps mostly intriguingly explored in the chapter on the international grieving over Princess Diana. A chapter subhead, “The Hauntology of Performance,” comes from Peggy Phelan’s “ontology of performance” and Derrida’s “hauntology,” and Taylor uses street murals to help chronicle the response by people hemispherically and culturally distanced from Diana, yet responding tangibly and strongly. What, in that moment, were people who only had mediated experiences of Diana actually performing? Taylor surveys a range of models and figures, including Selena Quintanilla-Perez, the popular Mexican singer who was murdered in 1995 at age 23, and Evita Peron, comparing and contrasting their images and international mobility thereof – their “visas” – with Diana’s. The murals are evidence of the mixed and variable responses possible when a scenario is enacted transculturally.

Taylor’s final chapter makes clear that hers is a social justice project. She cites a gathering in Central Park, full of music – largely rumba, which she explains has a historic

association with political resistance – where the police arrived and disrupted the gathering. The authorities’ reason, Taylor asserts, is that the gathering was dominated by brown people; her conclusion is that subaltern cultures can be exhibited inside the nearby Metropolitan Museum of Art but not “performed” – a more dangerous, less controllable proposition – in the less regulated environment of the park. Such are the conflicts Taylor seeks to study. In the passage on Diana and Selena, the terminology includes which icon is granted a “visa” for wide cultural currency (Diana) and which one is not (Selena). Thus does Taylor examine performances illustrating patterns of injustice and oppression; thus does she employ performance studies to turn her gaze to the street. *The Archive and the Repertoire* takes no interest in texts/plays. Taylor’s project is more concerned with the actuality and the historically repeated/varied contours of such conflicts as renowned black scholar Henry Louis Gates getting arrested by the Cambridge police outside his own home, where he was locked out – the “profiling” event and rich “scenario” that led to a famous “beer summit” between Gates, Cambridge police sergeant James Crowley, President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden in 2009, a history that played out after Taylor’s 2003 book but that fits the patterns of her study. Still, the idea of archive and repertoire is a useful way to frame a contemplation of politics and American playwrights in a similar light with Carlson’s ghosting. Both approaches rely on history, memory, and a familiarity with patterns that can be reactivated and perpetually refreshed.

These theories may be of help in the quest for a post-*Angels* definition (and its discontents) of American “political” theater. The powerful influence of Brecht on 20th century theater nearly inextricably yokes notions of political theater to a dogma that champions non-realistic forms. Theories and practices have abounded repudiating the

bourgeois/hegemonic effects of realism and naturalism, leading to long-nurtured reactions and prejudices against popular forms and mainstream venues. (This prejudice – the discontents of the political – is explored at length in the next chapter.) Yet the type of drama Kushner has called for is neither particularly exotic in terms of form nor terribly difficult to recognize, though it has become rare. It is the largely (though not exclusively) realistic play, directly engaged with contemporary topics in the purview of governance. Caspar H. Nannes offered a definition in his 1960 *Politics in the American Drama*, a useful survey of topical playwriting through the first half of the 20th century: “The major action of a play revolves around the political theme,” Nannes wrote. He offered several classifications: “The dramas may deal with (1) candidates running for office, corruption in government, specific political issues; (2) outstanding political figures such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, or Fiorello La Guardia; (3) political philosophies, such as Naziism, Fascism, or Communism, or (4) political situations” (x). All four descriptions apply to *Angels in America*, which (1) exhumed Ethel Rosenberg to make clear the corruption of Roy Cohn, Joseph McCarthy’s assistant, in her famous execution (on charges of treason) alongside her husband; (2) named president Ronald Reagan as negligent during the AIDS crisis; and (3 and 4) debated the nature of American democracy while holding up its characters’ private and public actions for ethical examination. Still: a palpable *habitus*, to invoke one of Jauss’s particularly useful reception theory concepts, has evolved in the U.S. erecting barriers against this brand of popular mainstream theater, political in subject and largely realistic in form. That is what spurs the repeated observations concerning political timidity among contemporary American dramatists; that there have been few, if any, *Angels in America* since Kushner’s

breakthrough indicates that the theater's unique ecology – which involves not merely writing, but an elaborate system of vetting and producing – remains challenging, daunting, and discouraging of the appearance of further such politically frontal works.

Even so, persuasive claims continue to be made by critics and scholars for the unique qualities of the stage and its particular ripeness for airing matters of civic concern. In “Enough! Women Playwrights Confront the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Amelia Howe Kritzer writes, “Theatre’s context and referent is the world, and as John McGrath has observed, ‘There is no such thing as a de-politicized world’” (Kritzer 1). Uniquely powerful to the theater, Kritzer asserts, are the audience and the involvement in a social reality. She cites the frequent tension between governments and the stage as “evidence of the close and perhaps intrinsic relationship between politics and the theater” (an assertion supported by Jonas Barish’s long history of those tensions, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*). “Though its free status is always mediated by multiple economic and regulatory factors,” Kritzer writes, “theatre offers a medium for exposing problems, exploring issues, advocating action in public or private life, and experimenting with changed relations of power within the context of a form that participates in the social in a variety of direct and metaphoric ways” (1). Joe Kelleher writes on the expectations of political theater in *Theatre and Politics* (2008):

The theater represents us, both in the sense of showing us images of ourselves and in the sense of standing in and standing up for us, like a delegate or a substitute or – indeed – a political representative. Theatre represents our lives to us in ways that can persuade us to make judgments on the quality and fidelity of those representations and to make critical judgments too on the lives that are so

represented. This second intuition – to do with the efficacy of an art form such as theatre, its power to produce effects – can impress itself upon us with such force we may feel that our theater should have no other business than responding to situations like the one in *Manaus*³ . . . These are the sorts of hopes and dreams and intuitions we find in that dream of a ‘political theater’ that haunted so much twentieth century theatrical experiment (Kelleher 10-11).

The stage’s readiness to address society’s methods and structures does not seem to have entirely lost its valence, at least not in the minds of these analysts.

Yet as pains are taken on the contemporary American stage to avoid direct political subjects, paradox becomes commonplace. In *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, Christopher Bigsby traces what he calls “the inward turn” of playwriting after the radical formal experiments of the 1960s, which witnessed the ascendance of performance above the written text in “happenings,” devised and improvised works, and deconstructions of classics. This assault on the text had roots in movements as diverse as Dada, Piscator, Brecht’s epic theater (which argued against empathetic responses in favor of promoting critical distance, with Brecht working against Aristotelian narrative in favor of an epic group of scenes that, at least theoretically, could be played in somewhat different order), and such manifestos as Antonin Artaud’s “No More Masterpieces” in the seminal *The Theatre and Its Double*, and in Jerzy Grotowski’s influential actor-centric *Toward a Poor Theatre*. American theater in the 1960s, informed by the perpetual threat of nuclear assaults in the cresting Cold War and by the social upheavals of the Civil Rights movements and increasing opposition to the war in Vietnam, also birthed a new theoretical field: performance studies, which continues to expand a wide embrace that

was pioneered through the 1960s and 1970s by the melding of interests between a theater practitioner (director Richard Schechner), anthropologists (Victor Turner and Erving Goffman), and linguists (J.L. Austin and Gregory Bateson).

For Bigsby, this radical theater/performance studies move, away from scripts and toward the actor, the audience, and the moment, “ushered in a period of intense self-concern” (239). Consider the journey of Spalding Gray, an early explorer in the realm of what has come to be described under the catch-all word “performance.” The actor, cast in Sam Shepard’s *The Tooth of Crime* and seeking the “authenticity” that was the ascendant holy grail of performances at the time, held a moment of direct contact with the audience for a period that became electric; at a certain point, Gray sensed, the moment transcended the text. “That was such a powerful meditation every night,” Gray said in 1996, “that my inner voice would start to say, ‘What if you didn’t go to the next scene, but just started talking from yourself?’” (Gray). Pursuing the roots of that connection, Gray, first with the Wooster Group and then solo, began performing *himself* – his personal history, then the quirky, relentlessly observational and performing persona he cultivated – in malleable monologues that helped usher in the era of solo performance art in the 1980s and 1990s.

Bigsby’s chapter headings in *Modern American Drama* say much about the movement of which Gray is a figurehead. Beyond Bigsby’s six canonical authors – half the book – the rest is concentrated on “The Performing Self” and “Redefining the Center: Politics, Race, Gender,” processes begun in the 1960s and continuing today. Self, race and gender became (and arguably remain) the dominant and legitimately political concerns of the American theater. Plays that carry the engagement beyond social fault lines all the way into governmental policy and performance (the Kushner-Nannes

definition) are another matter, however, and that is the sense of “political play” used by Michael Patterson in *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights*. Patterson, chronicling works from the 1950s through the 1970s, defines the term “political theater” as he believes it to be popularly understood and practiced in Britain: theater with pro-socialist, anti-capitalist intent. Again starting with the foundational influence of the Marxist-based ideas of Piscator and Brecht, Patterson rapidly acknowledges and dispatches with the tenet that “all theater is political” in nearly exactly the same way Kushner did in 1997.⁴ Patterson goes on, in a notably routine tone, to briskly sharpen the meaning of “political theater” to “a kind of theater that not only depicts social interaction and political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems” (4-5). Patterson’s definition is notable for its lack of insistence on any particular form, instead deriving from subject, and from political aim.

That economic-leftist brand of playwriting has deep roots not only in the U.K., but in the U.S.: capitalist-questioning plays flourished on the American stage from the 1910’s to World War II, peaking in the post-Crash, Depression/Dust Bowl 1930s. Longtime *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson characterized noteworthy 1920s American dramatists as liberal-leftist writers critiquing the capitalist model (Atkinson 291). In the 1930s, with the American economy shattered, workers’ theaters emerged – this on the heels of broad experimental theatrical movements and radical workers’ theaters across Europe in the late 1910s and into the 1930s – often organized by labor unions. The workers’ theater productions typically hectored audiences with baldly

propagandistic intent, and the movement was significant. In *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America*, Loren Kruger writes that in 1930 there were 21 workers' theaters in the U.S., a number that rocketed to more than 400 by 1934, with 100,000 spectators estimated that year for the workers' theater Shock Troupe (Kruger 141, 144). Kruger explores how the genre's vaudevillian and satiric technique, typically tailored for rough-and-tumble presentations in union halls rather than as polished plays in conventional playhouses, influenced the Federal Theatre Project's signature form, the exhortatory, issue-driven, documentary-style Living Newspaper. Lee Papa, introducing a collection of American workers' theater dramas, draws a line all the way forward from the workers' theater creations to Bread and Puppet Theater, David Mamet, Anna Deavere Smith and the Tectonic Theatre Project as he writes, "These plays provide a key to a transformation in American literature and culture, through drama and theatre, in the representation of workers' lives. It is not overstating the case to say that works by Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill are direct descendants of the movement" (Papa x).⁵ In her memoir *Arena*, Federal Theatre Project director Hallie Flanagan wrote about the hazards of navigating a legitimate, politically feasible path for the governmentally funded (and supervised) FTP. Keeping her congressional constituency from feeling antagonized by the fist-in-the-air material on stage was a perpetual concern, yet Flanagan plainly staked a claim for politics in the programming. "The theater must grow up," Flanagan declared at the time. "The theater must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theater" (46). Retrospectively, Flanagan observed:

If they [the projects] were mixed up in politics, it was because life in our country is mixed up with politics . . . None of us believed that FT should concern itself with politics, with political candidates, with political preferment. Yet it was logical that a theatre which had its root in economic need should be concerned in some of its plays with economic conditions . . . It was strikingly true that our playwrights and our playgoers cared about economic and social plays (181, 183-4).

The expectation in the 1930s that theater would be, *had to be*, politically engaged confounded Harold Clurman, one of the three directors (with Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasburg) of the influential Group Theatre. Many of the idealistically formed company's actors signed on in hoped of performing in more socially charged works than they found typical in the commercial theater, and in *The Fervent Years* Clurman chronicles the unrest as the actors chafed at what they felt were conservative repertory choices by the directors (Clurman 130-31). "What I was driving at was that plays didn't have to deal with obvious social themes to have social significance," Clurman wrote (65), adding of his own political reticence (which aggravated some of his more fervent colleagues), "No one could tell where we stood. I particularly seemed to resist being swept into any final conclusions" (93). Clurman's political timidity seems ironic in light of the fact that the troupe's greatest triumphs were sparked by its young, fiery, politically engaged dramatist, Clifford Odets. *Waiting for Lefty*, with its appropriation of workers' theater format in its passionate handling of a pressing proletarian issue, its union meeting scenario, and its mixture of propagandistic direct address and empathetic, realistic slice-of-life scenes,

remains a landmark in American theater, both in its announcement of a significant new dramatic writer and for the sensation of the 1935 opening. The play agitates for a strike, intercutting the tensions in a union meeting between crusading labor organizers and sinister management thugs with poignant scenes of hardship due to oppressive working conditions. Theatrical lore, reinforced by Clurman, has it that audiences joined in the cast's climactic calls for a strike. Even Clurman, writing a decade after the fact, fairly tingled with the memory of the opening. "Our youth had found its voice," Clurman concluded. "It was a call to join the good fight for a greater measure of life in a world free of economic fear, falsehood, and craven servitude to stupidity and greed" (148).

Odets was hardly alone in his rattle-the-foundations intentions, which were shared by many mainstream writers creating comedies and dramas in the commercial theater of the time. Though Arthur Miller singled out Odets and Lillian Hellman as artistically superior to the general run of writers in their era, a Shavian/Kushnerian brand of serio-comic (sliding to either end of the dramatic-comic scale, depending on the work), realistic, direct engagement – Kushner's idea of "representing political struggle on stage" – was a hallmark of the fertile 1930s. "One ought to remember that it was by no means only the 'Left' writers who wrote social plays," Miller recalled in 1960. "Maxwell Anderson, [Robert] Sherwood, [Elmer] Rice, Sidney Howard, even [S.N.] Behrman and [Philip] Barry were involved with the themes of social and economic disaster, Communism and Fascism" (Robert Martin 231). This flowering had roots that preceded the political disasters these dramatists addressed. As American drama began to mature in the early 20th century, Ibsenism was a conspicuously strong influence; crusading, socially provocative realism was the hallmark of James A. Herne and Rachel Crothers (whose

1911 *He and She*, for instance, uncannily anticipates the wry yet isolated/lonely late 20th century feminist visions of Wendy Wasserstein). American playwrights even displayed an impressive anticipatory quality, creating probing plays about class and capitalism before the 1929 Crash (Eugene O'Neill's 1922 *The Hairy Ape* among them, with Barry's 1928 screwball comedy *Holiday* arguably more subversive toward the capitalist plan than Rice's existential 1923 *The Adding Machine*). As Nannes chronicles, American dramatists offered plays about World War II prior to Pearl Harbor and continued through the conflict in *Idiot's Delight*, *A Watch on the Rhine*, *Margin for Error*, *There Shall Be No Night*, *The Rugged Path*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, *The Searching Wind*, and more, with certain writers even shifting position along the way. In contrast, American playwrights amassed no comparable track record of dramatic responses in the years after 9/11.

Nannes, building on Arthur Hobson Quinn's 1927 *A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day*, wrote, "We have not had many serious studies of our politics, largely because of managerial dread of controversial subjects . . . But there were enough plays before 1890 to provide a base upon which later dramatists could build" (13). Nannes's survey argues that the Great Depression was a turning point that intensified national interest in Washington and its policy-making habits, and that the period marked a new maturity of American playwriting in its exploration not only of such themes as corruption and injustice, but also of political philosophy. The Depression and New Deal era saw a flourishing of theatrical responses to national matters, ranging from the satiric musical *Of Thee I Sing* and its successor, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933, with an eye on the 1932 presidential election) to Maxwell Anderson's *Both Your Houses*, targeting

corrupt Congressional practices. George M. Cohan played Franklin Delano Roosevelt in *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937), which Nannes describes as optimistic yet critically aware, though less critical than *Washington Jitters* (1938). Among the recurring themes that Nannes identifies in the era's output: the complaint that too many people "don't care what happens in their government" (119), and, conversely, that citizens do care and are willing to act. In his chapter on Robert Sherwood, "Evolution of a Liberal," Nannes illustrates the journey from the staunchly anti-war *The Road to Rome* (1928) and *Idiot's Delight* to *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), in which the decision about war was more difficult for Sherwood to dismiss. The backdrop at the time *Abe Lincoln* was produced, Nannes notes, was the Munich Conference of Sept. 1937, when Neville Chamberlain and Eduardo Deladier chose the diplomatic path with Germany that they came to regret. By 1940, Sherwood wrote *There Shall Be No Night*, in reaction to the Lindbergh speech and to Russia's invasion of Finland (156). By 1945 and *The Rugged Path*, Sherwood was arguing that liberals did not have the luxury of inaction. This evolution is a pattern that Nannes sees playing out among a number of playwrights, with Elmer Rice (*Flight to the West*, 1940) and Sidney Howard (*Ghost of Yankee Doodle*, 1937) among those wrestling with the liberal dilemma, which persisted into the 1940s.

In 1937, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Robert E. Sherwood, S.N Behrman and Sidney Howard – "The Big Five," as Atkinson calls them – united to create their own producing company, the Playwrights' Company. "All of them were also responsible citizens very much interested in the political and social welfare of America. They were, in fact, more interested in the world outside the theater than in the current affairs of Broadway," Atkinson writes (Atkinson 271). The group was a quick success –

“Dominant” by the 1938-39 season, in the longtime *New York Times* critic’s judgment (272). Howard’s *The Ghost of Yankee Doodle* (1937) “Discussed the conflict between business and patriotism in terms of a second world war, which had begun to cloud the American horizon” (273). Behrman depicted “An early problem of Nazi brutality” in 1933 with *Rain from Heaven* (276). Of Rice: “His most powerful plays had social or political points of view” (278; Atkinson’s list of notable Rice works includes *We, The People*). Of Anderson’s 1933 Pulitzer winner, *Both Your Houses*: “A trenchant indictment of dishonesty in politics” (280). *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*: “A deeply moving primer on democracy.” *There Shall Be No Night*: “A poignant, brooding, valiant acceptance of war by a democracy defending itself against a totalitarian nation” (286).

“A kind of poetics of politics was pieced together,” Helen Krich Chinoy wrote of 1930s American drama, “a radical reconsideration that may not have changed the world as intended but did change forever what theatre meant for us and for those who came after” (Chinoy 478). Chinoy wrote her essay in the 1980s, intending to put the Reagan era’s comparative paucity of political writing (simultaneously lamented by Martin Esslin and others) into context and suggesting a kind of ineradicable iconic status for the socially engaged U.S. dramatist. The archival image that began in the 1910s and 1920s and rode a crest from the 1930s through the 1950s and the national drama of the HUAC hearings remains an influential chapter in the American public and theatrical “archive.” Miller, thanks to the fame he earned by standing up to the governmental authority, played his scenario with flair, depositing for himself and for the concept of the American playwright a formidable heroic image. Arguably the most iconic of American dramatists, Arthur Miller sought a moral high ground throughout his career, in plays and essays that

consistently championed a theater concerned with man as a social animal. Drawn onto the public stage during the House Un-American Activities hearings, Miller subsequently performed the role of public scourge and social conscience, consistently invoking the playwright's license to opine widely not only on his art ("The State of the Theater," "Broadway, from O'Neill to Now," more) and what its highest purposes may be ("Tragedy and the Common Man," "Arthur Miller vs. Lincoln Center," more), but even on national politics and policy ("Are We Interested in Stopping the Killing?," "On the Shooting of Robert Kennedy," "The Battle of Chicago: From the Delegates' Side," "Toward a New Foreign Policy," "Get It Right: Privatize Execution," *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, and many more writings, to say nothing of his interviews, speeches and public appearances).

Jeffrey D. Mason exhaustively reconstructs Miller's 1956 HUAC testimony in *Stone Tower: The Political Theater of Arthur Miller*; his purpose is to delineate Miller's thinking on freedom of expression and the government's right use of power, but in that process he positions Miller not as the most rebellious of witnesses. In fact, Mason finds that Miller was actually more cooperative than Hellman and Paul Robeson, among others. Yet Miller gained lasting stature by declining to discuss anyone's activities but his own. "To refuse to name names remains Miller's signature gesture of resistance," Mason writes (Mason 36). That gesture resides in the archive alongside what is arguably Miller's signature work, *The Crucible*, which took aim at McCarthyism and blacklisting by way of the Salem Witch trials.

Miller was preceded as a figurehead of resistance by Lillian Hellman, whose life kept adding scenarios to the archive of playwright as resistance hero well into the 1970s. Atkinson, retrospectively chronicling the 1930s, wrote:

Of the many writers opposed to the status quo in American society, the most clearheaded and the best organized was Lillian Hellman . . . Like just about everybody on Broadway and probably in America, Miss Hellman was horrified by the spread of Nazism in Europe. Unlike other people, she was able to do something about it. She wrote *Watch on the Rhine* in April 1941, seven months before Pearl Harbor . . . What Sherwood and the Lunts had begun the year before [in *There Shall Be No Night*], Miss Hellman continued with an exhilarating play that consolidated public opinion because her drama was unanswerable (Atkinson 302-3).

Atkinson notes that no Pulitzer for drama was awarded that year: “The committee pretended not to have heard Miss Hellman’s voice . . . In the valiant person of Miss Hellman, the depression and the brutal conquests by Hitler and Mussolini produced a major dramatist. She had the hatred and fearlessness, the clarity and independence, to deal with the major evils” (304).

Though Hellman’s plays have not remained as in vogue as Miller’s, hers is as indelible (if more controversial⁶) a case of the dramatist as a political writer and social conscience. By the 1970s, Hellman, who had addressed capitalistic opportunism in *The Little Foxes* and World War II in *A Watch on the Rhine* and *The Searching Wind*, disavowed the “propaganda” that she once asserted as key to any interesting piece of theater (Bryer 7, 49, 62, 66, 103). Yet Hellman’s memoirs were making her a cause

célèbre all over again, particularly *Scoundrel Time* (1976) – which recounted the McCarthy era and her role opposing it – and *Pentimento* (1973), follow-up to her memoir *An Unfinished Woman* (1969). A section of *Pentimento* became the Hollywood film *Julia* (1977), in which Hellman recalls her young self being prodded to political consciousness and anti-Nazi resistance by a girlhood friend named Julia.⁷ That Hellman’s entire “Julia” memory may have been fabricated, as some charged in the wake of the book and the film, is incidental here.⁸ The book and the movie both do exemplary “ghosting” work activating the scenario of the nascent but eventually acclaimed playwright Hellman in the fundamental struggles for social justice, even though at the time in real life Hellman was appearing in 1970s magazine ads sporting fur, with the ad line, “What becomes a legend most?” The struggles in *Julia* are not only for stageworthy words, though we do see that evolution of a writer as Jane Fonda’s Hellman agonizingly types and revises, with input from Jason Robards’s Dashiell Hammett, Hellman’s longtime love interest and tough-minded literary mentor. Hellman’s struggle is also for worthy deeds, and for noble conscience. Via the crusading Julia, Hellman learns to work for justice, to oppose war, to stand up against Nazis.

Such, then, was the 1977 edition of Hellman. Hellman told *Esquire* in 1964, “I’ve never believed in political messages, so it is hard for me to believe I wrote them” (Bryer 66), but the playwright she played at the peak of her public visibility and literary acclaim in the 1970s not only believed in political messages intensely, but performed them. The third act Hellman, more than the signatory of *The Children’s Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, is the Lillian Hellman of legend, the Hellman we now have in the archive: tarnished, perhaps, but intuitively political, aggressive in time of war with her own statements via

stage productions, a petite single woman swinging back at the darkest powers of McCarthyism (Joe, not Mary), more durable and thus more Odetsian than Odets.

That reactivated image of the American playwright as larger than life, heroic, and politically engaged can be seen in the 1975 film *The Front*, in which Woody Allen plays a cashier (an occupation with obvious overtones) who acts as a front for blacklisted writers in the 1950s. As the scripts Allen's character submits draw acclaim and make him famous, political pressure rises through the television studio that employs him to name the names of Communists he may know – the very people, of course, for whom he is fronting. The film, a scenario that revives ghosts from the Miller-Hellman-Hollywood 10 archive, shows Allen's character gradually finding his conscience until, summoned by the committee, he pointedly refutes their authority and walks out of the hearings. Activating a potent political-theatrical memory, *The Front* (which famously employed a number of once-blacklisted artists, and was written by the formerly blacklisted Walter Bernstein) revives and re-stokes the legend as the commercial-minded beard gradually learns the high stakes and inexorably public function of playing/being the American playwright.

The Case of Kushner

This is the kiln, to borrow August Wilson's language in his manifesto "The Ground on Which I Stand," in which Tony Kushner was fired: these archival images of playwrights as idealistic social crusaders are among the most durable ghosts when a writer commits to creating for the stage in the United States. That Kushner would claim Brecht as an inspiration and a conscious model adds complexity to the formal mixture of

his plays, which struggle successfully to incorporate radical and popular techniques in a way that make his characters' intensely political dialogue both meaningful and theatrically viable (in other words, playable, a factor not to be discounted when dealing with a performing art, especially in a topical mode). Kushner's influences are various – Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Odets, Williams and Miller all offer useful frameworks – with Shaw, Brecht and Miller standing out particularly because of the manner in which Kushner chooses to engage the archival image of playwright as activist, not only in his own public performances as celebrated author-of-conscience but in the way he conceives of and crafts his plays.

Kushner thinks of politics practically and widely, as identity and culture, but also as history, economics, national identity, and international policy. In 1997, Kushner set out to define his idea of political playwriting in an essay for *The Kenyon Review*. He addressed the difficulties of embracing such a calling – “It feels much like coming out of the closet, only lonelier” (Kushner “Notes” 26) – and the difficulties of definition and practice. The essay is worth quoting at some length for its cogently itemized, powerful diagnosis. Despite the deep archive of the American playwright as social critic, there is, in fact, a problem – a disturbing break with tradition, a void of activist voices taking the stage:

It is incredibly hard to use, unembarrassedly, words like *oppressed* and *oppressors*, even in an essay, and even more so onstage. We feel that the rhetoric of politics is somehow enlarged with failure, tainted with betrayal and a partisan-driven simplicity; we feel we've heard it before, which is interesting, considering how thoroughly purged of such talk our drama actually is . . .

Our forays into theater that addresses political or historical issues are generally misguided and embarrassing. We write history plays which, because they are written for audiences that know no history, in a theater that has been stripped of its pedagogic capabilities, are ludicrously oversimplified and hence denuded of meaning except for easily graspable platitudes about love (history as soap opera) or liberty (history as the endless rehashing of high-school civics). We live in terror of seeming too partisan; we playwrights too often adopt a stance of cynical sophistication that delights in revealing the essential corruption or essential stupidity or essential decency of both over- and underdog. This easy relativism makes political analysis impossible, but at least we don't "insult" our subscribers by preaching or seeming didactic. We are in the lamentable position of having to eschew most political issues because we simply have no vocabulary with which to discuss them. Our aesthetic codes preclude complex political discourse far more effectively than any government censor could hope to accomplish (Kushner "Notes" 22-23, emphasis Kushner's).

"We have no vocabulary," Kushner writes. Indeed, the essay is a charge of political illiteracy in American drama. The horizon of expectations has been drastically constricted for writers and audiences.

The difficulties and precepts Kushner enumerates will be revisited in other contexts throughout this project. Kushner himself, though, activated his poetics of politics with fervor in his 90 minute *Angels* companion-piece, *Slavs! Or Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1994), with an establishment of

political literacy as a key. The nominal subject is the collapsed Soviet Union, but of course it is written for contemplation by American audiences, and was created out of extra matter from the two-part, seven hour *Angels in America*. Of course, for this comic but densely-packed political work to have found an audience to any degree at all – for an American playwright to be granted a visa to wax farcical and tragic on the fall of Soviet communism – Kushner required both a hospitable social horizon of expectations and a willing interpretive community. *Slavs!* arrived on the coattails of *Angels*, which, in the course of its wide international success, had established a new sort of interpretive community conversant with Kushner’s uniquely prolix, pragmatic-theoretical strain of theatrical language. Stanley Fish’s definition of interpretive communities:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round (Fish “Affective Stylistics” 1980, qtd. in Bennett 40).

With *Angels*, Kushner ghosted the interpretive strategies once shared between Shaw, Brecht, Miller, et. al. and their audiences. The popularity of the piece verified a previously suspected (by the critics lamenting an absence of political stage projects in the 1970s and 1980s) but unproven constituency, or interpretive community, that allowed Kushner to renew his political visa with *Slavs!* Kushner, for the moment, had license, a community primed via *Angels* for a theatrical vernacular rich in political theory, with

characters not merely bantering or swapping topical dialogue (unusual as even that had become on U.S. stages), but living through recognizable history and suffering from the consequences of flawed political praxis.

The subject in *Slavs!* is, as the full title suggests, thinking about political systems, something Kushner is painfully aware of as an uphill struggle in his American theater. Thus he seeks at the beginning, with his intellectual vaudeville title (drawn from Raymond Williams) and with his flatly comic opening, to welcome contemporary audiences with necessarily reduced/diminished habits, even those schooled by *Angels*, into his politically thick milieu. “When the play is being performed,” Kushner advises in his *Slavs!* production notes, “you have to remember that the audience is being ushered instantly into an unfamiliar world – the accents, the history, the theoretical, rhetorical, poetic speech, the political, moral, romantic passion are all unfamiliar; and the audience must be relaxed in order to listen to what the characters are saying” (Kushner *Slavs!* 94). Kushner “relaxes” the audience with his title – the exclamation point of *Slavs!* echoes the absurdly enthusiastic nomenclature of many a Broadway musical – and begins the script with a joke. The play opens on a pair of babushkas sweeping the falling snow off the steps of the Kremlin, and talking political theory:

FIRST BABUSHKA. A vanguard-driven revolution as the only alternative to Reaction. For the People make their own history.

SECOND BABUSHKA. Limits are set by the conditions of their social developments.

FIRST BABUSHKA. But those conditions are themselves affected by the state of their economic relations (*Slavs!* prologue).

The scene is brief and not daunting in its humor: when two Politburo members walk by, the babushkas silence themselves and act the parts of foolish proletarians (“How-de-doo! Mind the ice! Don’t slip!”) too obtuse and incompetent to have their fates decided by these self-important bureaucrats. One of the bureaucrats remarks that the babushkas’ sweeping of the perpetual snow is Sisyphean; he smugly assumes that the babushkas do not get the reference. The women do indeed comprehend. Their melancholy understanding and social marginalization are instantly clear, and that becomes the metaphor of the play. They sum up a near-century’s worth of tyranny and futility under Soviet socialism. The have/have not gap between the governing and the governed is power-based and material, not meritocratic or intellectual.

The formal terms – heightened realism, comedy, politically literate dialogue for characters across the social spectrum – are set. As with Shaw, the social medicine will be administered with jokes. “You missed a spot,” First Babushka says to her sweeping partner, only briefly interrupting her windy statement on Marx and Engels. Also as in Shaw, whose blend of social comedy and social analysis was invoked by the subtitle of *Angels*, the comic *Slavs!* blatantly advertises its serious political intent.⁹ As *Slavs!* examines politics, it moves, in three short acts, from discredited socialist theory to blatant political corruption to a horrifying inversion of praxis, depicting a government that, contrary to improving the lives of its citizens, cavalierly poisons its people. Kushner offers his broadest comedy in the theory-laden first act, juxtaposing the conservative and

progressive Marxist positions with exhilaratingly absurd names for his characters. Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelasparianov is the idealist who yearns for a clear new theory to replace the discredited old one; Ippolite Ippolitovich Popolitipov is the reactionary who argues, “The heart is conservative, no matter what the mind may be”; Yegor Tremens Rodent is a low-level apparatchik whose name evokes that of acting Russian Prime Minister (1992) Yegor Timurovich Gaidar. The first act debate, set in the context of the Soviet experiment and its breakdown, is largely theoretical, with Prelapsarianov dying as he determines that “Progressive People are THE POLITICAL ENEMIES OF GOD! He HATES US!” and the progressive, optimistic Serge Esmereldovich also dying as he leaps (literally) to symbolize the proletariat leaping en masse into the future.

Popolitipov survives into the second act, an act depicting national decadence and marked by the funk of inactivity, set in the storage facility for the great brains of history, now jarred in liquid and guarded by Katherina Serafima Gleb, depicted as a lazy, surly young lesbian. Popolitipov woos Gleb, but she is revolted. As Popolitipov unburdens his conservative heart to Gleb in a variety of romantic poetic styles, she rejects them each in turn (“Too personal,” “Too psychological,” “Too technological,” etc.), echoing the patterns of voters bored with their candidate’s florid platform promises and interested only in receiving the most indulgent constituent service (“You were supposed to bring cigarettes”). The vindictiveness of raw power is dramatized as Gleb flaunts her lesbianism with her pediatric oncologist lover, the appropriately fearful Bonfila Bezhukhovna Bonch-Bruevich, in front of the jealous Popolitipov. The play’s tone sobers – the nihilistic Gleb’s alarming, aimless drunkenness drives the downward key change –

and the third act opens with Bonch-Bruevich, reassigned by the vindictive Popolitipov, practicing on hopeless medical cases in the punishing social exile of Siberia.

The third act is pure muckraking. In an act that rebukes the rhetorical strategy of politicians to invoke “our children” and “the future,” Kushner places a weebegone child, doomed as any Dickensian waif and emblematic of governmental recklessness, at the center of the action. Eight year old Vodya Domik does not speak; she is a victim of radiation that has polluted the country from nuclear bombing tests to Chernobyl, with more nuclear waste likely en route from the west, which will pay the post-Soviet, cash-strapped Russia to take the literal and political poison off its hands. Vodya, whose ailments are exhaustively listed by Bonch-Bruevich (and who is unusual in that most children suffering from her menu of maladies die by age six), is a voiceless victim and the figure of future generations bleaker yet than Gleb’s. Rodent, who arrives to report on conditions, is government at its worst – a dangerous, vain lackey, more hapless than ever and thus looking to consolidate some scraps of power by nurturing racist and fascist leanings. The frustration this figure engenders in Dr. Bonch-Bruevich is formidable, yet her bitterness is dwarfed by that of Vodya’s mother, whose wit’s-end tirade about her daughter, directed at Rodent, marks the climax of the play: “She’s not a, a, a person! NO! Take her to Yeltsin! Take her to Gorbachev! Take her to Gaidar! Take her to Clinton! YOU care for her! YOU did this! YOU did this! She’s *YOURS*.” This climax is a stunning inversion of Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*: instead of tugging for her child but letting her go to an imposter rather than ripping her apart, Mrs. Domik wildly demands a political reckoning and thrusts Vodya at the forces that callously destroyed her. Mrs. Domik returns (“Get your filthy fucking hands off my child,” she tells Rodent),

then exits with the strongest possible notes of judgment and finality: “Fuck this century. Fuck your leader. Fuck the state. Fuck all governments, fuck the motherland, fuck your mother, your father and you.”

In *Slavs!* Kushner systematically charts a passage of government from theory to gross mal-praxis, and it amounts to a near-raiding of the political landscape, appropriate at the historical moment of Glasnost and Perestroika and the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, in the quest for a new organizational starting point. If the play has a *raisonneur*, it may be Bonch-Bruevich, who somberly says to Gleb after Rodent departs, “I still believe that good work can be done, that there’s work to be done. Good hard work” (act three). The brief epilogue finds young Vodya in a derelict heaven with Upgobkin and Prelapsarianov, with the three of them musing on the problem: “What is to be done?”

The success of *Angels* created a ready interpretive community for *Slavs!*, a body of artists, audiences and critics that had embraced Kushner’s demanding epic of AIDS and Reaganism, yet in the second play, comparatively streamlined and substantially more preoccupied with theoretical dialogue, party conflict and resistance, Kushner presents himself far more directly as a political thinker. That self-conscious positioning provoked a similar stance in critics, who often responded primarily as political analysts themselves. Reviews routinely introduced the shorter play as a thematic companion piece to the longer one, though the reception to the denser, bleaker drama, which subjugates conventionally rounded characters, romantic complications and cliffhanging narrative tension for more frontal consideration of ideology and praxis, was mixed on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the British critics responding to the U.K. premiere at the Hampstead

Theatre, Michael Billington was perhaps the most penetrating, replying to Kushner's political inquiry in its own earnest terms:

A dynamic political collage . . . British dramatists of the left – such as [Howard] Brenton in *Berlin Bertie* and [David] Edgar in *Pentecost* – have confronted the ideological vacuum of the new world. What distinguishes Kushner is the unashamed emotionalism of his approach. In depicting the corruption and nuanced despair of communist life he presents us with an old-fashioned sexual triangle: in one scene a soulful apparatchik and a lesbian doctor vie for the love of a young female drunk who guards the pickled brains of former Soviet leaders. It is a typical Kushner episode: grotesque, fanciful, comic and yet fully aware that the real power lies with the Party hack who has the capacity to banish his amatory rival to Siberia . . . He asks whether the failure of the Soviet experiment necessarily invalidates the idea of social ownership and planned management. Unlike *Angels In America*, you sometimes feel the play is the product of hard reading rather than direct experience (Billington "Postcards").

Alastair Macauley wrote favorably of the project in the *Financial Times*, declaring, "The sheer scope of his ambition is refreshing" (Macauley "Slavs!"). The response was varied from Benedict Nightingale *The Times*, who seized on the exclamation point of the title to suggest that Kushner's serious tone is not sure enough (Nightingale).

The U.S. response was also mixed, but the influential lead review in the *New York Times* from David Richards was quite negative, dismissing the work as intellectually

slight. The *Times* critic, who previously held the drama critic position for the *Washington Post*, characterized the play this way:

A series of loud, blustery, sometimes funny sketches . . . This 87 minute evening is more in the nature of a doodle, really . . . You can recognize in ‘Slavs!’ many of the qualities that made ‘Angels’ distinctive: the playwright’s eagerness to engage an audience in lively political discourse, his willingness to follow his imagination wherever it leads him and his ability to undercut himself with wit whenever the pronouncements start turning too serious. That said, what you have here is not much more than a cluster of intellectual vaudeville sketches linked to one another only because they happen to have an overlapping character or two (Richards “History”).

Lloyd Rose, Richards’ successor at the *Post*, was similarly hostile to the play’s perceived lack of genuine political sophistication. Reviewing Lisa Peterson’s production at Baltimore’s Center Stage, Rose wrote:

Kushner is clever, all right, but as a thinker he’s soft-minded and cloudy. He tends to coddle his own opinions, as if they were beautiful little birds doomed to live only a few short hours in this brutal world of pragmatists and Republicans. ‘Slavs!’ is a windy, self-righteous lament for the ideals of brotherhood upon which the Soviet revolution was founded . . . A lot of the scenes run on without making any noticeable point, and the long political monologues have no tension: Nothing is at stake for the characters; they’re just spouting opinions. There is one

extremely affecting scene, centered on a little girl who has been harmed by nuclear radiation – but it takes no particular talent to wring an audience’s heart by showing an injured child. Our sympathetic response is going to be automatic . . . ‘Show me the words that will reorder the world, or keep silent!’ the oldest Bolshevik exclaims. Is Kushner heeding this plea, and is this lachrymose nostalgia for an ideal that went hideously wrong what he offers to reorder the world? Society is better off with his jokes (Rose “The Marx Brothers”).

Rose’s mind did not change, and the condescending Marx Brothers headline was largely the same, when Washington’s Studio Theatre produced the play later the same year. She wrote, “There’s nothing that could pass for analysis, or even for thought . . . In the end, all it tells us is that Kushner’s heart is in the right place. If you want more than that from a political play, you need to wait for the next production of Shaw or Brecht” (Rose, “‘Slavs!’: Groucho Marxists”). It is notable that Rose attacks Kushner chiefly and specifically at the level of politics, and that she reaches back across decades for the comparisons by which she finds Kushner wanting.

Other American responses found value in the aims and effects of Kushner’s drama. David Patrick Stearns, the respected critic of *USA Today*, suggested that *Slavs!* might well be categorized as a “great play,” and observed, “Much of it seems as American as it is Russian, particularly in the way the old party bosses, seeing life hazily through their cataracts, retreat into an upbeat, almost Reaganesque ideology that, amid Russia’s economic and environmental crises, is unconscionable” (Stearns). In the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby’s “Sunday View” column enthusiastically championed the

play. Canby called it “a rambunctiously funny, seriously moving stage piece that is part buffoonish burlesque and part tragic satire. From beginning to end, it’s also shot through with the kind of irony virtually unknown in today’s theater, movies and television.”

Canby detected echoes of Chekhov in the wistful ineffectuality of certain characters, yet he also embraced Kushner’s broad comic style. Canby wrote, “‘Slavs!’ uses cartoon figures to suggest that man’s ability to bear up under the unbearable isn’t limitless. After being flattened by a steamroller, it suggests, people don’t pop back into shape like Bugs Bunny” (Canby).

The long-term reception of *Slavs!*, however, pales next to that of *Angels*, despite its comparatively softer demands on audiences and producers in terms of time and resources, and its similar ease of accessibility.¹⁰ While *Angels* enjoyed a highly publicized sellout New York revival in 2010-11, enjoys sustained visibility in the easily available HBO production, and continues to be produced (and taught) widely, as of March 2012 the most recent professional U.S. revival of *Slavs!* appears to have been at the small Custom Made Theatre Company, in San Francisco, charging a top price \$25, with half-price tickets advertised by the online discount service Goldstar, in a cross-gendered production staged in 2008. (The 13 year old Custom Made, “committed to producing plays that awaken our social conscience,” according to its home page, also offered Kushner’s *A Bright Room Called Day* in the spring of 2012.)

Still, the climactic question in the play, “What is to be done?”, remains, for a contemporary American dramatist, rare in its bluntness. It functions as a conscious, practical attempt to re-establish the political vocabulary that Kushner subsequently argued the American theater lacks. In “American Things,” an essay included in the

collection with *Slavs!*, Kushner wrote, “The American political tradition to which my parents made me an heir . . . is the aggressive, unapologetic, progressive liberalism of the thirties and forties, a liberalism strongly spiced with socialism, trade unionism and the ethos of internationalism and solidarity” (5). Those are the ghosts of the American workers’ theaters, of Odets and the Group, of the FTP, of Miller and Hellman. Their theater is fundamentally realist and politically direct. In *Slavs!* Kushner retells the familiar story – familiar being the kind favored by the Greeks and of particular appeal to the public-oriented form that is the drama – of the fall of socialism in Russia, and does so in a way that magnifies the shortcomings of political systems at large. In 2009 culture reporter Andrea Stevens wrote of Kushner, “Perhaps alone among American playwrights of his generation he uses history as a character, letting its power fall on his protagonists as they stumble through their own and others’ lives. And like a prophet, he wants his listeners to think hard about the world and their place in it” (Stevens). That is an old idea about playwrights, not a new one. A plausible reason for the continuing acclaim of Kushner’s *Angels in America*, beyond the inviting humor, the flamboyant theatrical imagination, and the tart exchanges as colorful romantic couples break up and rebound (all ingredients of popular drama), is its unusual political literacy, the fact that the characters – presumably like the audience/interpretive community – know and talk about political figures past and present, and that some of the characters, while fictionalized, are even drawn from significant episodes in recent history (Roy Cohn, Ethel Rosenberg). For these characters, political banter is not an extraordinary thing, and that baseline political literacy in itself is sufficient to set Kushner’s dramaturgy apart.

Despite the longstanding grip of realism on American playwriting, the intrusion of real politics in contemporary U.S. playwriting is, as Kushner's 1997 essay attests, practically verboten. The assumption, then, seems to be that the theater – or at least a theater based on conventional, realistic, scripted – is not a place for the kind of direct, realist-based, unapologetic social engagement defined by the first generation of mature American playwrights from O'Neill into the 1930s. "Ours is the only modern country which is in a state of permanent revolution," director and Group Theatre co-founder Harold Clurman wrote in *The Fervent Years* (viii). The theater mirrors that idea: Arthur Miller wrote frequently of a drama "dedicated to testing American values," as Christopher Bigsby puts it (115). Bigsby added of Miller, "What else is theater, after all, than a shared apprehension of a common condition, an acknowledgement that there is a level at which the experience of one is the experience of all?" (123). As *Slavs!* emerged in the mid 1990s, Kushner said:

I think it's a very bad thing to offer reassurance when people shouldn't be reassured. I also believe in entertaining people. That's the struggle in me: the necessity of presenting a sufficiently terrifying vision of the world so that it can galvanize action – which is something art should aspire to – and really wanting people to have a good time and to get solace from what I do (Fisher 95).

Janelle Reinelt offers a cogent definition for political theater in "Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy." "Theater and performance, seen as an institution whose chief function is the production

of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change,” Reinelt writes. At the same time, she acknowledges that that is not the dominant view:

In a time when much theater practice, especially in commercial and regional venues, seems anemic or irrelevant to public life, the affirmation of this constitutive function of theater¹¹ is essential. It means that we will have to reconceive of our theaters as a place of democratic struggle where antagonisms are aired and considered, and where the voluntary citizenry, the audience, deliberates on matters of state in an aesthetic mode . . . It is difficult to claim that it functions this way at century’s end (Reinelt “Notes” 289).

In the spring of 2011, Kushner was suggested for an honorary degree from the City College of New York. The nomination caused an extra-theatrical stir when it was met with resistance, not on the basis of Kushner’s playwriting but by a board member’s objection to certain political statements from the dramatist. The controversy illustrates how potently Kushner has embraced the archival role of, and claimed a cultural visa for, the American playwright as a public political figure, an attribute that was singled out in the nominating letter authored by professors Amy Green and Michael Meeropol. They cited *Salon*: “In an age when the American theater has grown increasingly divorced from public life, Kushner, like a latter-day Arthur Miller, stubbornly insists on the playwright’s role as political provocateur.” Earlier in the letter, however, the authors declared, “Playwright Tony Kushner has created a body of dramatic literature that has revitalized the consciousness of the American Theater” – the capitalization is theirs, and it is telling – “through his unique brand of magic realism.” The praise is not wholly accurate; it is

actually wishful thinking. Kushner had and has no cadre of playwright provocateurs in any recognizably revitalized political American Theater. Peculiarly, he is *sui generis*.

Chapter Two

Reception and The Anti-Political Prejudice/*Habitus* in America

The propensity to speak politically, even in the most rudimentary way, that is, by producing a 'yes' or a 'no,' or putting a cross beside a prefabricated answer, is strictly proportionate to the sense of having the right to speak.

-Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*

Should the theater be political? Absolutely not.

-David Mamet, *Theatre*

In her 1997 study, *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett quotes British scholar Janet Wolff on what amounts to the social horizon of expectations (though Wolff does not use that term¹²) and the creation of works of art:

The forms of artistic production available to the artist play an active part in constructing the work of art. In this sense, the ideas and values of the artist, themselves socially formed, are mediated by literary and cultural conventions of style, language and genre and aesthetic vocabulary. Just as the artist works with the technical materials of artistic production, so he or she also works with the available materials of aesthetic convention. This means that in reading cultural products, we need to understand their logic of construction and the particular aesthetic codes involved in their formation (Bennett 92).

The notion of “socially formed” ideas and values and especially the phrase “particular aesthetic codes” echo Kushner’s argument regarding the “prevailing aesthetic codes” that act to close down the political playwright in America. As if to prove Kushner right, another leading playwright, David Mamet, rhetorically posed the question above regarding political theater in his nonfiction book, *Theatre* (2010), replying with that resounding negative (57).

There is a chorus of approval for Mamet’s position. The ritual of articulating an anti-political theatrical stance has become, in America, what Bourdieu labels a “habitus,” an acquired social disposition that is distinct, chronically reified, and a normalizing gesture:

As a system of practice-generating schemes which expresses systematically the necessity and freedom inherent in its class condition and the difference constituting that position, the habitus apprehends differences between conditions, which it grasps in the form of differences between classified, classifying practices (products of other habitus), in accordance with principles of differentiation which, being themselves the product of these differences, are objectively attuned to them and therefore tend to perceive them as natural . . . Life-styles are thus the systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as ‘distinguished,’ ‘vulgar,’ etc.) (Bourdieu 172).

“Necessity,” “difference,” and “classifying practices” are the concepts that speak most directly to the dynamic that, in practical terms, constitutes an anti-political prejudice toward American playwrights. Across a range of positions, critics posit a “necessity” against politics on the stage (vulgar, inherently improper), though these critics often do not support or explain the prejudice. The practice is to invoke a norm dismissing politically oriented work as better suited to lecture halls, or as insufficiently psychologically constituted for the proper purposes of the stage. Such critical moves constitute the “difference” and “classifying practices” of the habitus. That such positions are not necessarily logical, but instead are socially reifying practices with geographic/cultural/national variants, will be suggested and illustrated in the following chapter. At present, it is sufficient to recognize Bourdieu’s idea of a system of production and selection:

Thus the tastes actually realized depend on the state of the system of goods offered; every change in the system of goods induces a change in tastes. But conversely, every change in tastes resulting from a transformation of the conditions of existence and of the corresponding dispositions will tend to induce, directly or indirectly, a transformation of the field of production, by favoring the success, within the struggle constituting the field, of the producers best able to produce the needs corresponding to the new dispositions (231-2).

These systems of difference, Bourdieu writes, are in constant meeting,¹³ a dialectic that might be regarded as a feedback loop of taste/reception and forms of artistic production. In combination, these forces constitute a curtailed horizon of expectations that denies a visa to the dramatist intent on directly addressing political themes. In the contemporary American theater, pressure toward the anti-political position is applied from nearly every possible vantage point – popular press, practical production, and theoretical critique. Terry Christensen, in his study of political films, *Reel Politics*, notes Samuel Goldwyn’s famous entertainment dictum that “Messages are for Western Union,” and writes, “Films with messages, they say, are box office poison, and therefore anathema to an industry that exists to make profits as well as art. Besides, these filmmakers point out, when they do make movies with political messages, they get attacked by critics, boycotted by minority groups, and threatened by politicians” (1). To suggest that the dominant reception is otherwise in the American theater is to discount abundant and ever-refreshing evidence, which this chapter – analyzing journalistic reviews, academic criticism, and theory – will survey.

The Popular Discourse

In the winter of 2010, the two lead theater critics for the *New York Times* pondered the political, noting a surge of topical themes on New York stages. The dialogue was prompted by a flurry of productions: the unexpectedly brief British import *Enron*, an Olivier winner in London that was instantly rejected in New York, closing after 22 previews and 16 post-review performances; a dramatization based on the Pentagon Papers; the musical *American Idiot* by the rock band Green Day; the John Kander and Fred Ebb musical *The Scottsboro Boys*; the Geoffrey Nauffts play *Next Fall*, about a gay couple with religious differences. The article took the form of an e-mail exchange, and chief critic Brantley wasted no time taking a stance as dismissive as Mamet's.

BRANTLEY. What I'm wondering is if it's possible for the theater to be truly topical in a culture of instant satire, when this morning's headlines have by midday been digested and regurgitated all over the Web and television by pundits and comics.

ISHERWOOD. I think there's an argument to be made that there isn't a wide audience for theater that simply apes what journalism can do better and more immediately . . . Nobody wants to go to the theater to see a staged op-ed piece or a lecture (Brantley and Isherwood).

Brantley notes that he has enjoyed topical theater that has arrived in New York with a British stamp, citing Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Gregory Burke's interview-based drama of the famed Scottish military unit, *Black Watch*. Isherwood: "Well, I have to

confess a mild sense of shame that Broadway has to import a play about the Enron scandal.”

This is no idle discourse. The influence of the *New York Times* reviews and opinions on theatrical practice is disproportionately powerful, not only on and off Broadway but in the regional theaters across the country that continue to seek imprimatur before scheduling their own seasons.¹⁴ Plays need to be not merely written, but also produced, to have cultural presence, and plays in contemporary New York, where the reportage and opinion-making (and theatrical advertising) is dominated by a single daily newspaper, often require positive reviews to draw audiences not only in New York, but to be selected for future productions by not-for-profit theater companies around the country. When the two lead critics struggle to find virtue, or even possibility, in a topical American theater, the disposition is forbidding, very possibly contributing to or even triggering a national chill.

Nor was this exchange an isolated response articulating wariness of the overtly topical or political. Brantley described Christopher Shinn’s *Dying City* as a “quiet, transfixing tale of grief and violence, set in the shadow of the Iraq war,” then subjugated the importance of the setting: “These are not, finally, topical questions, though headline events like Abu Ghraib and the fall of the World Trade Center figure as backdrops” (Brantley “The Walking Wounded”). Isherwood’s response to Rajiv Joseph’s *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (which starred Robin Williams) resorted to the same politically diminishing move:

I should emphasize that “Bengal Tiger” is not a civics lesson kind of play to be dutifully attended like a cultural homework assignment. Man and beast, and man turned beast, are depicted throughout with a fanciful humor that still allows for clear-eyed compassion . . . Such questions are tendered by Mr. Williams’s gruff tiger in an offhand, conversational tone that considerably lightens their weightiness. (The exception perhaps is a late speech decrying God’s indifference in overly bald terms.) Similarly, Mr. Joseph’s play to its credit does not aspire to make overarching and obvious statements about the morality of warfare. It is more deeply concerned with the facts on the ground, namely how the baser instincts of human beings inevitably come to the fore in an atmosphere tense with the threat of violence (Isherwood “Ghostly Beast”).

Brantley’s discomfort with politics as politics was put on display in his 2011 review of Kushner’s *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism, With a Key to the Scriptures* (2009):

I never felt that the anguished souls of “Angels” – even politically loaded figures adapted from real life, like Roy Cohn and the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg – were only pawns of history, on the one hand, or of authorial manipulation, on the other. They had all the contradictions and untidiness that come with free will. The characters of “Guide” are untidy, for sure, but they don’t always feel spontaneous. There’s a sense of Mr. Kushner’s pushing them into position for their moments of one-on-one confrontation (Brantley, “Debating Dialectics”).

Such contrived yet anticipated confrontations constitute the *scene à faire* of French melodrama, as Kushner would almost certainly be aware. But melodrama itself is a form held in low regard for its perceived lack of social and psychological realism, and its overloading of good and evil to opposite sides. Such a starkly schematized either/or (or left/right) dynamic could be argued, though, as applying with relative ease to the standard social template of political discussions, debates, and/or elections, where issues must be settled and sides must be taken.

The persistent sense running through much of the Brantley-Isherwood exchange and their individual responses is that political issues are poor subjects for the theater; that critical policy pushes the horizon of expectations for Kushner's notion of "representing political struggle on stage" across a forbidden border, leaving politically-minded playwrights stranded without the vital visa. Such an inhospitable critical position is constitutes a habitus in its reflexive acceptance and ratification/perpetuation/normalizing of an arbitrary stance – a matter of taste – about what fundamentally is and is not appropriate for representation on the stage. According to the patterns of this habitus, the system of anti-political classification acts in such a way that as soon as characters in a play can be politically identified, they are routinely dismissed as "mouthpieces" for the playwright, and the playwright then can be said to have embarked less upon on an artwork and more upon a "lecture" or an "essay." Shavian criticism is rife with this trope; this well-rehearsed complaint, again, is part of the self-imposed "aesthetic codes" that Kushner laments. Stephen Holden's *New York Times* review of the film adaptation of Rebecca Gilman's controversial stage drama *Spinning Into Butter* (1999) is exemplary for its rehearsal of the standard objections. "Its characters," Holden writes, ". . . are

mouthpieces of ludicrous boilerplate reeking of condescension and incomprehension. Even the term minority is scrutinized and found poisonous . . . *Spinning Into Butter* is less a movie than an essay . . . The characters' inner selves rarely peek out from under the heavy political baggage weighing them down" (Holden). The bias for psychological realism over politics and ideology in artistic representation, consistently invoked in drama criticism, is almost ritualistically asserted. The claim that one approach should have primacy over the other is assumed, not explained, an "it goes without saying" presumption that conforms to and reinforces the habitus.

Even praise comes with asterisks. Isherwood wrote enthusiastically about J.T. Rogers's *Blood and Gifts* at Lincoln Center Theater in 2011, yet he did not refrain from framing his analysis with warnings about how exceptional it is to see politics and history handled properly – that is, with an eye toward the kind of rounded psychology that Mac Wellman has derisively labeled "Euclidean" (Wellman):

A history lecture "Blood and Gifts" definitely isn't; Mr. Rodgers's knowledge of the hearts and minds of his characters is as deep as his grasp of the geopolitical games being played . . .

When he [British intelligence agent Simon Craig] learns that major weaponry is to be channeled to Hekmatyar, Craig erupts in a typical burst of seething sarcasm, asking Afridi if the Afghans themselves have been consulted: "You know, 'Hello, Afghans! Would you mind terribly if we try and install a maniac to rule you and then sink your country into a civil war?'"

Plays determined to give audiences a quick adult-education class lesson in history tend to be staid lectures clumsily dressed as drama. (See David Hare's "Stuff Happens.") By contrast, the characters in "Blood and Gifts" never come across as proxies for the author, re-enacting his view of the events for our edification. They really seem to be living this turbulent history, trying to stay one step ahead of the unfolding chaos, and to stay alive, too, while retaining some small measure of moral dignity (Isherwood "Choosing").

Isherwood here subscribes to one of the essential bromides of contemporary dramatic criticism: that it is sloppy dramaturgy for audiences to know where playwrights stand. That position implicitly defines the critic as a strict *regulator* of dramatic form, which is quite different in character to being a *respondent* to forms and approaches; in eliminating the playwright's role as a participant in public discussion via the drama, it also perpetuates the erasure of the playwright as thinker.

The provenance of Rodgers's *Blood and Gifts* is not insignificant, though Isherwood does not mention it in the review: it was commissioned by London's Tricycle Theatre as part of its *Great Game: Afghanistan* cycle. Rodgers withdrew the work when it became clear that he had a full-length tale (and commercial interest) on his hands. It is almost only incidentally an American play, and not a brand of play that American critics are predisposed to accept.

Yet as we have seen, there is strong evidence that earlier generations of audiences took an interest in knowing where playwrights stood on issues of the day. The arbitrariness of the contemporary anti-political, anti-playwriting habitus can be suggested

by the strikingly different cultural responses to political/topical stage projects in New York (hostile) versus the response in London (engaged), with Lucy Prebble's *Enron* as a provocative example. Prebble's representation of Enron executives Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, and Andy Fastow was deeply rooted in history, painstakingly explaining such high-finance terminology as "mark to market" and Fastow's sophisticated accounting practices while chronicling the energy company's cultural rise and fall, documenting watershed moments such as Skilling's (premature) internet ventures, which included commercializing the broadband for the kinds of data streaming that have since become commonplace, and the 1996 deregulation of California's energy market, which contributed to the state's dramatic energy crisis in 2000-01. Prebble inflated the drama with cartoonish characterizations that depicted Skilling as a *Bonfire of the Vanities*-style "Master of the Universe" ("Jeffrey Fucking Skilling," goes one spoken and sung refrain) and Fastow as a groveling sycophant. It also rendered Fastow's shadow companies as raptors, appropriating terminology that Fastow himself used, and depicted the Arthur Andersen accounting firm using sock puppets. Most significantly, it characterized the company and the "irrational exuberance," to borrow the famous term used in 1996 by Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, of America's 1990s economic culture, in the loud, bumptious go-go party terms of triumphantly giddy song and dance numbers. The show was a winner of the Olivier Award in London, yet was received with critical revulsion and a premature closing notice in New York. Brantley, in the *Times*, acknowledged, "British reviewers have piled on the superlatives, admiring the show's thematic audacity, moral severity and all-out razzmatazz. Of course, British and American tastes don't always coincide in such matters, especially when the subject is

American.” Brantley’s American view described *Enron* as a “flashy but labored economics lesson”:

The realization sets in early that this British-born exploration of smoke-and-mirror financial practices isn’t much more than smoke and mirrors itself. “Enron” is fast-paced, flamboyant and, despite the head-clogging intricacy of its business mathematics, lucid to the point of simple-mindedness. But as was true of the company of this play’s title, the energy generated here often feels factitious, all show (or show and tell) and little substance (Brantley “Titans”).

“Little substance” is a striking and perhaps difficult to support assertion for a play that a) addresses the notoriously complex and, perhaps more to the point, socially and economically momentous Enron debacle on the stage at all,¹⁵ b) is “fast-paced, flamboyant and, despite the head-clogging intricacy of its business mathematics, lucid to the point of simple-mindedness,” and c) Brantley describes as devising “an assortment of annotative visual images, designed to explain both the byzantine, corrupt accounting practices that did Enron in and the moral bankruptcy of the men who ran it.” It seems plausible that a taste for the Brechtian¹⁶ and music hall approach of Prebble and director Rupert Goold resonated better in Britain than with Brantley, who closed his review by describing his fascination with the psychological depiction of Enron chief financial officer Andy Fastow, shown in thrall to the raptors that symbolized the dark, rapacious aspects of his business arrangements. The critic’s lone affinity, then, was for the idiosyncrasy of character, not for history, policy or corporate/social/political praxis.

“Long on flash and short on insight,” Chris Jones wrote in his negative account for the *Chicago Tribune*, adding, “It also comes with a certain British smugness” (Jones “In Simplistic ‘Enron’”). That review was of a 2012 Chicago production by Timeline Theatre Company, a rare troupe with a mission of history resonating with contemporary issues, and with 92 seats in its venue. The British-born Jones was slightly more generous in his review of the Broadway iteration of *Enron*, writing, “‘Enron’ is a mish-mash with one foot in the tatty, good-night-out tradition of British political-populist theater,” and “This is an arrestingly timely show with some real intellectual juice running through its veins. It has every ounce of your attention” (Jones “‘Enron’ on Broadway”). However, some American critics saw it England’s way, even if first sending out the usual anti-politics-and-topicality warnings. “My heart sank in the opening moments of ‘Enron,’” wrote Charles McNulty in the *Los Angeles Times*, “the rambunctious drama about the spectacular rise and ignominious fall of the Texas-based energy company, when the phrase ‘mark to market’ kept recurring. Playwrights aren’t usually conversant with concepts of high finance, and most of us theatergoers prefer it that way.” After bowing to the critical habitus with that dread preamble, McNulty praised the play, saying it “concentrates on a handful of top executives and ends up hauling in the zeitgeist,” and that “Prebble’s language fails her when she tries to sum up the wreckage through her characters, but the scale of the moral debacle has been brilliantly surveyed” (McNulty). “It’s a two-and-a-half-hour lecture on business history, and it’s utterly thrilling,” declared the *New York Observer* (Oxford), though “lecture” seems the wrong term (though plainly the widely feared result of the enterprise) for what the *New York Post* asserted in its opening paragraph “isn’t a lecture or a documentary. It’s a *show*.” The italics were

Elisabeth Vincentelli's; the critic, working against the standard template, waited until her second paragraph to grunt about topical dramas: "After snoozing through many well-meaning tracts about Iraq," Vincentelli wrote, "the prospect of a play about a financial meltdown wasn't appealing. But 'Enron' is a whip-smart, edge-of-your-seat ride that'd rival anything at Six Flags – there are even raptor-headed businessmen prancing around" (Vincentelli). "Like *60 Minutes* on acid," opined *Entertainment Weekly* in its mixed "B-" assessment of the production.

In both commercial and not-for-profit theater it is still true that reviews, especially from the *Times*, can be determinative at the box office. The reviews of *Enron* appeared April 28, 2010; the show posted a closing notice on May 4 and shuttered on May 9.¹⁷ As of spring 2013, *Enron* had received no substantial production history since. "It's ironic that this incisive carnival was originally made in England," McNulty wrote. "But rather than be thin-skinned about the foreign critique, let's be grateful that a show as improbable as 'Enron' is getting a chance at a U.S. hearing." That hearing did not take place: the playgoing public still has not had the opportunity to judge for itself. Thus the loop of the horizon is drawn tighter, and the habitus is reified, critically enforced and perpetuated in the U.S. by lack (of writing, of production, of endorsement). "Any artistic form depends upon some readiness in the receiver to cooperate with its aims and conventions," writes the British Shakespearean and postwar scholar Alan Sinfield (qtd. in Bennett 25). The American critical habitus is not to cooperate with political theater, with consequences that quite practically circle back to the act of creation. Bennett notes that drama is different from other arts in that failed shows – those that don't sell enough tickets – can "collapse" the theaters that produce them. Thus, Bennett observes, "Pre-

performance evaluation certainly reduces the range of productions available and does this more stringently than other kinds of artistic production” (53). The elements of “pre-performance evaluation” are not limited to reviews, of course; marketing and socioeconomic considerations are among the factors that come into play. But criticism is a pivotal part of the “overcoding” around a given show, the social horizons of performance, or what Richard Schechner and others have termed the “before” of performance.

Despite the strong tradition of political/topical works on U.S. stages in previous decades, the habitus of refuting political works largely for their transparency as political works is not entirely a new one. Lorraine Hansberry’s posthumously produced *Les Blancs* – a calculatedly Shavian response, realistic and position-driven, to Eugene Ionesco’s absurdist *Les Negres*, and examining the shifting power relationship of the white West to emerging Africa – was, on its 1970 opening, repeatedly devalued by critics on the ground that the play’s politics were showing; as with *Slavs!*, the blatant political content, pressed fully forward by the characters’ professions, circumstances and debate-oriented dialogue, prompted revoked visas from reviewers critics. Martin Gottfried wrote, “There is no story to the play, really . . . a didactic play, existing for its ideas rather than its theatre.¹⁸ Its characters are stereotypes, created as points of view rather than as people, and its language heavy with information . . . It is still unfinished because, as a work for the theatre, it was mistakenly begun.” Another critic, Haskel Frankel, wrote, “The African setting is no more African than those walking symbols are really stage people . . .” (Nemiroff 132). From Clive Barnes: “The major fault of the play is in the shallowness of the confrontations. The arguments have all been heard before . . . and the people in the

play are debased to labeled puppets mouthing thoughts, hopes and fears that lack the surprise and vitality of life. No one, throughout the play, says anything unexpected” (Nemiroff 136).

Harold Clurman’s against-the-grain review considered the hostile critical reception:

I suspect . . . that resistance to the play on the grounds of its simplistic argument is a rationalization for social embarrassment . . . It is an honest play, in which thought-provoking matter is given arrestingly theatrical body . . . To wave aside “Les Blancs” . . . is an evasion which I am inclined to ascribe to bad faith, especially in view of what certain folk call “good theatre” (Nemiroff 134).

“Wave aside,” “evasion” and “bad faith” pierce the pro forma analyses that amounted to no-politics-allowed dogma in the *Les Blancs* critical response. Also piercing are Clurman’s quotation marks around “good theater,” a subjective phrase that, again, implicitly privileges psychology and character while assuming politics to be an intrusion on the autonomy of rounded characters. (More on the problem of psychology vs. politics in dramatic characterization shortly.)

This offhand political dismissal was deployed in the *Washington Post* as Peter Marks greeted the Tricycle’s ambitious, journalistically vetted geopolitical cycle, *The Great Game*, in 2010. (Since its “tribunal plays” helped pioneer Britain’s verbatim theater movement in the 1990s, the Tricycle Theatre has frequently used journalist Richard Norton-Taylor as both a writer and a dramaturg.) “Like Pilates, fiber and

meditation, ‘The Great Game: Afghanistan’ is indisputably good for you,” read Marks’s condescending, horizon-of-expectations-establishing opening of what turned out to be a respectful review. “You emerge after seven-plus hours almost feeling, as after voting, that you’ve satisfied a civic responsibility.” The warning eventually gave way to a positive conclusion: “It’s exhaustive and at times overly tilted toward instruction. But ‘The Great Game’ remains a desirable exercise for anyone who thinks about the world’s have-nots, and what the haves are doing to them” (“Quagmire”). Regarding Arthur Miller’s *A View From the Bridge*, Marks repeated the “mind-the-message” pattern: “If you’re mistrustful, though, of theater that seeks to impart a moral, Miller can seem, even in his most celebrated plays like ‘Death of a Salesman’ and ‘The Crucible,’ somewhat high-handed.” The wary pattern in Marks’s criticism, ghosting the same patterns employed by Isherwood, Brantley, and in many of the American *Enron* reviews, can be viewed in light of Taylor’s archive and repertoire, as a scenario pulled from a deep social archive, for Miller himself was long accustomed to this peculiarly American disposition of discomfort. “A Greek living in the classical period would be bewildered by the dichotomy implied in the very term ‘social play,’” he wrote on the occasion of *A View from the Bridge* in 1955. “Especially for the Greek, a drama created for public performance had to be ‘social.’ A play was for him a dramatic consideration of the way men ought to live” (Martin 51). Marks, a former *New York Times* critic, normalizes an assumption of popular “distrust” into his report, and then sarcastically reinforces it: “‘Justice,’ [Michael] Cristofer’s Alfieri tells us portentously in the opening moments, ‘is very important here.’ Yup, we get it: We’re here for a lesson” (“Miller’s ‘View’”).

Again, even in a deeply admiring rave, Marks is compelled to restrict the horizon of expectations and confine Miller's trademark social inquiring to a marginalizing box. It is a disingenuous criticism, a waving aside, an evasion – a dance that is a deeply ingrained critical and social habitus. As the review evolves, Marks indeed notes, if grudgingly, why the persistently political Miller made his choices, and the useful broadening effect those choices have:

Maybe it's the intensity of alarm sounded by the crisp and persuasive Cristofer, but this time around, the narration is fairly effective in helping to establish the groundwork for sorrow. Although they date the piece, Alfieri's lengthy asides also envelop the work's concerns in a sense of occasion, of matters that are larger than those that play out in the Carbones' drab habitat.

Relegating such conditional praise to near-footnote status contributes to a prevailing critical reception that is consistently predominantly distrustful and forbidding. As if to illustrate how steadily skepticism greets political art in America, the same day that Marks negotiated his way through Miller's treacherous minefield of meaning, National Endowment for the Arts Chair (and longtime Broadway producer) Rocco Landesman, in a radio interview on WAMU-88.5 FM in Washington, D.C., said this:

I am very, very adamantly against the politicization of art, both ways – either art that is in effect propaganda – you know, I have a real visceral aversion to what is sometimes called “message art.” I can't stand it, and I hope the NEA isn't going to fund it. On the other side, I think it's a terrible mistake if a politician wades

into an artistic enterprise in a very heavy-handed way and tries to get rid of something because he or she doesn't like it. I think that's equally reprehensible ("Diane Rehm").

This is a sweeping dismissal, even taking into account the exceptionally contentious history that gives context to Landesman's remark. The inflammatory history of the NEA dates particularly to the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment* exhibit at Washington's Corcoran Museum in 1989; that exhibit, along with backlash against Andres Serrano's photo "Piss Christ," crystallized the tensions of what became known in the 1990s as the Culture Wars. At the NEA, the controversy became focused on the divide between artists often working with sexually provocative material and usually in non-traditional forms (especially the so-called "NEA Four" solo performers Holly Hughes, John Fleck, Tim Miller and Karen Finley) versus conservative politicians willing to use the leverage of Congressional funding to promote what were typically cast as "traditional values." The NEA's annual budget has been frozen in the vicinity of \$170 million ever since (the figure has diminished even further in recent years), with grants to individual artists forbidden. Naturally, that turgid history, still recent, encourages any chairperson – even one with such a reputation for candor as Landesman, who stepped down at the end of 2012 – to tread carefully regarding statements about appropriate content for publically funded art. Nonetheless, given the funding and production apparatus that determines the repertoire in the American theater, such comments as "I have a real visceral aversion to what is sometimes called 'message art.' I can't stand it" from the most powerful arts administrator in the nation are, again, chilling to artists contemplating the creation of socially challenging material. Thus the

horizon of expectations for representations of political struggle is set to the level of invisibility. The routinely anti-political commentary from public pulpits not only influences the producing climate; the commentary is necessarily negatively determinative.

Such a frankly skeptical/disinterested, even irritated attitude toward politics and topicality seems to be peculiarly concentrated not in novels, films, or television, but in the theater. (Again, that hostility has a long history: the Pulitzer committee in 1924-25 awarded Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted* over Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings's *What Price Glory?*, "which the jurors curiously decided was merely 'topical'" (Firestone 301.) There has been no shortage of movies dealing with the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq – *Jarhead* (2005), *Redacted* (2006), *The Kingdom* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Grace is Gone* (2007), *Body of Lies* (2008), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *The Messenger* (2009), *Brothers* (2009), *Restrepo* (2010), *Green Zone* (2010), etc. – yet on stage, American playwrights were slow in responding to the wars, and have not been notably vocal on any other political development of the decade. Film critic A.O. Scott could ponder the political neutrality of recent war films in a 2010 essay, but at least he had a body of work to consider (Scott). Screens have not lacked for films exploring corporate and financial scandals (*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Capitalism: A Love Story*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, *Too Big to Fail*, *Inside Job*, *Arbitrage*, *Margin Call*). To adapt the Valerie Plame incident – which involved the CIA agent whose cover was deliberately blown by the Bush administration, apparently in retaliation for Plame's husband's pushback against the State of the Union speech that wrongly asserted Iraq's interest in

Nigerian “yellowcake” (nuclear weapons material) – Hollywood turned not to an American, but to British playwright Jez Butterworth (*Jerusalem*) and his brother John-Henry.

The volume of (and, often, acclaim for) political material continues to increase. The 2013 Best Picture Oscar was awarded to *Argo*, which retold the recently declassified history of the CIA operation that rescued six hostages from Iran in 1979. *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, and *Lincoln*, the Steven Spielberg movie with a script by Kushner based on Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*, were also showered with nominations. (Accepting the award as Best Actor, *Lincoln* star Daniel Day-Lewis was able to turn to presenter Meryl Streep and make a joke about both of them winning in consecutive years for playing heads of state; Streep was British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*, a film written by British playwright Abi Morgan.) The summer of 2012 saw the premieres of two new high-profile politically-themed TV series, the HBO comedy *Veep* and the scandal-fueled but issues-sensitive USA drama *Political Animals*, based more closely on the Clintons than even *The West Wing*.¹⁹ (Similar is the ABC political drama *Scandal*, rich with tabloid subplots involving underhanded behavior linked to the White House – adultery, blackmail, etc. – but also surprisingly lucid and even demanding in its fast-paced articulation of political processes.) HBO has carved out a distinct niche for political fiction: in 2012 it programmed the latest topical series from *West Wing* creator and head writer Aaron Sorkin, *Newsroom*. The Will Farrell spoof *The Campaign*, like the wild success of Tina Fey’s 2008 impersonations of Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*, further illustrates the cultural penetration of contemporary American politics; *The*

Campaign is directed by Jay Roach, who found receptive territory at HBO for his *Recount* (a dramatization of the 2000 vote counting crisis in Florida) and *Game Change* (about the 2008 general campaign, with Julianne Moore as Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin). The half hour situation comedy *First Family* (2012-continuing) focuses on the fictional second black U.S. president; another situation comedy, *1600 Penn*, surfaced on NBC in spring 2013. *Homeland*, an acclaimed dramatic series on Showtime since 2011, deals with a CIA officer who has returned to the U.S. after an assignment in Iraq. *Farragut North* dramatist Beau Willimon has developed and written the political dramatic series *House of Cards*, starring Kevin Spacey, for Netflix (which made the entire first season available in February 2013). In the winter of 2012-13, FX debuted a rapid breakout hit in *The Americans*, a U.S. vs. U.S.S.R. spy drama set in the Cold War 1980s. It is inexplicable that political subjects should flourish to such an extent on U.S. screens yet struggle to such a striking degree on U.S. stages.

Even within the theater, suspicion of the political – Kushner’s assessment that “We live in fear of seeming partisan” – is often cast in the same wary linguistic terms articulated by critics. Howard Shalwitz, artistic director of the nationally respected vanguard Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., said of Sheila Callaghan’s 2009 corporate culture-driven update of Calderon’s *Life Is a Dream*, *Fever/Dream*: “It’s tricky, because you don’t want to do cheesy, ripped-from-the-headlines references. You have to find a way to get them in the play that’s really authentic to the story that’s being told” (Baldinger). That dread of headlines stands in contrast to that of *New York Times* critic Alessandra Stanley’s view of the then-new television series *Damages*: “‘Damages’ borrows heavily from the front page, and that

keeps it interesting” (Stanley). In theater, specific topicality is peculiarly viewed as a dramaturgical liability; it is akin to being seen as a propagandist, which has come to have toxic implications. Playwright Paula Vogel said in 1998, “I think balancing acts are exactly what theater should be doing, because otherwise the playwright becomes a god with a thesis . . . It’s interesting. I’m seen as this kind of hot-button, issue-oriented playwright. I think issues are very useful to construct a balancing act, to construct empathy, to try and make an audience look at different sides of an issue. But I don’t have a thesis.” Playwright Thomas Gibbons, interviewed in 2010 about his *Permanent Collection* (exploring the factor of race in arts administration, using the case of a museum), said, “Without question, the challenge of this play was to present both viewpoints in the conflict fairly, with as much eloquence and clarity as I could summon, so that the audience feels it’s not being propagandized. I’m not interested in telling an audience what I believe; I hope to prod them into asking themselves what they believe” (Lawton).

Again, the fault line is an old one, archival in American drama. Harry Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, attended the FTP’s 1937 Living Newspaper production *Power*, which anatomized the business practices of big energy companies. “People will say it’s propaganda,” Hopkins said after seeing the play. “Well, I say, what of it? It’s propaganda to educate the consumer who’s paying for power. It’s about time someone had some propaganda for him. The big power companies have spent millions on propaganda for the utilities . . . I say more plays like *Power* and more power to you [the cast]” (Flanagan 185). In *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism*, Patricia Schroeder challenges the assumptions that audiences are unwitting and

vulnerable in the face of propaganda. Surely, Schroeder argues, theater patrons are not as gullible as the undiscerning bumpkin who could not recognize that what he was watching in a theater was a story in *The Contrast*.²⁰

George H. Szanto, in *Theatre and Propaganda*, notes the popular equation of propaganda with untruth, lies and manipulation, thus justifying its widespread rejection. “In the schema, the notion of propaganda has taken on the rather hazy meaning, ‘someone else’s wrong opinion.’ Such a popular conception of propaganda can serve an audience member as an easy basis for dismissing the play and its intentions” (Szanto 3). Szanto spends a good deal of space on distinctions between “agitation propaganda,” which overtly aims to provoke response and generate change, and “integration propaganda,” which tends to be a more insidious promotion of the status quo. Though his chief project is to usefully expose the “unself-conscious” distorting mechanisms of integration propaganda (“a devious phenomenon,” 74), Szanto comes to embrace a third category, “dialectical propaganda,” which uses Brecht as its model and is valorized for its conspicuous formal exposure of social relations (rendering it as paranoid and doctrinaire as Boal, despite his initial protestations against structural determinism). Along the way, though, Szanto identifies the corrosive tropes surrounding propaganda, challenging the default positions that all art is propaganda, or that art is the opposite of propaganda: “Though both these generalizations can at moments be seen to have validity, very quickly they obliterate any sense of the specific kinds of relations possible between art and propaganda,” he writes. “Such generalizations eschew analysis, and more: they most often prohibit it” (11). Much later, he contends, “All theater is propagandistic. As it

presents partial information (the play's aesthetic perspective) and takes an ideological position in relation to that information, no play can avoid its propagandistic role" (72).

"All art is propaganda," Upton Sinclair wrote a half a century earlier. "It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda" (Sinclair 9). The prevailing habitus of aesthetic codes, though, dictates that propaganda is indeed inherently malevolent, and that to write politically is to proselytize, which is beyond the pale of art. Even Alexis Greene, introducing the collection *Front Lines: Political Plays by American Women* (2009), resorts to the standard apologia. "Finally," Greene writes of the dramatists she has rounded up explicitly for their rigorous social engagement, "their work is theatrical, not polemical. They are artists, not stump speakers. These plays are to be relished for their imagination and craft as well as their content" (xvi). Paradoxically, the content is what most plainly unites the *Front Lines* collection.

John W. Frick makes similar arguments in "'Odets, Where Is Thy Sting?': Reassessing the 'Playwright of the Proletariat'" (in *Realism and the American Tradition*, edited by William W. Demastes). Frick argues that Odets is misread as strictly propagandist, but that it is his transcendence of propaganda that gives his work continued valence. Eventually Frick writes that the issues Odets addressed have not been resolved, that in America we are still at risk of "life being printed on dollar bills," Odets's resonant phrase from *Awake and Sing!* (It is not certain, but it is certainly imaginable, that Odets would have taken an interest in, and a stand on, the nationwide 2011-12 "Occupy" movements.) Mostly, though, Frick pursues the contention that Odets was not simply propagating a political line. He begins with the habitus: "If Odets's 'message,' his

political imperative of social reform, were his sole contribution to the American theatre, his work truly would be dated.” Why, exactly? The assumption is not supported, and even Frick does not seem entirely persuaded by this line of thinking, though he saves the argument for last that Odets’s social concerns are, in fact, genuinely enduring. Instead, his analysis privileges psychology and character as Frick contends that Odets was not writing about policy, but about human beings with broken dreams, and that roaming the streets of Depression era New York with Clurman enriched the playwright’s capacity for human empathy and his ear for the concerns and cadences of the downtrodden. Loss is explored as a theme (universal, of course), as is loneliness, and a contrast is drawn with O’Neill, who asked the same questions to metaphysical effect, rather than Odets’s preference for the social first and the psychological second (Frick 132). Frick even explores the emotional hole in Odets’s personal life because of a lack of a satisfying family, for which the Group was a substitute. Thus, “. . . It was these intensely personal and human concerns, not simply a desire for social reform, that drove Odets to write, and it is his compassion . . . that is one of the most recognizable and consistent characteristics of his work and that rendered him a spokesman for a significant portion of American society – the disenfranchised and the abandoned” (132). It is difficult to see the split between these concerns, and it is ingenuous – albeit a pivotal component of the classifying imperative of the taste-making and taste-reifying habitus – to draw such practically illusory distinctions between social reform and human concerns.

Frick also takes pains to show that Odets went beyond “mere slice-of-life” dramaturgy in his plays (133). Frick leaps to the symbolic, the representative – not the one but the many, arguing for the broad symbolic appeal at work in dramas from *Street*

Scene and *What Price Glory*? He cites Williams and Miller, basically arguing that their characters are examples of “fusing the contemporary with the poetic, realistic dialogue with symbolic force, anger and despair with warmth, tenderness and compassion, to forge a unique and remarkable dramatic idiom” (quoting Gabriel Miller, *Clifford Odets*, p. 14). That, of course, sounds like a return to the political, suggesting that the binary either/or is not the most productive way to think of the dynamic interplay of realism and symbolism, the personal and the political. Perhaps a better image is that of a braid. As Chinoy explores tensions of form and content in “The Poetics of Politics: Some Notes on Style and Craft in the Theatre of the Thirties,” she concludes:

We have neglected an important heritage that can speak to the eighties as it did in some measure to the sixties. In this heritage the mimetic and the didactic, the personal and the social, the poetic and the political are all artistic strategies, equipments for living. I therefore say to you if you want to send an urgent message to the world about what life is all about in the terrifying eighties – an eighties message not a thirties one – don’t use Western Union, as we were admonished to, *use the theatre*” (Chinoy 498, italics hers).

Frick suggests that “Viewing Odets’s work symbolically pays immediate dividends” (134), regarding *Paradise Lost*, for instance, as about an entire American class, not a single implausible family. That, of course, squares with the way we usually understand plays to work. The problem must be in the Noel Coward line: “The moment the public sniffs propaganda, they stay away.”

In a Coward play, they might. But in Odets and Miller, Hansberry and Kushner, the social ideas are the allure; that is the archival roles they and their dramas played. Yet

in the popular discourse, and in strikingly strong, consistent terms in this contemporary epoch, such are the standard variations on Mamet's "Of course not" when the question is whether the theater should be political.

The anti-Aristotelian Imperative

Political playwriting is not only actively and/or implicitly discouraged on the front lines of reviewing, which directly influences the development, selection and production of plays as well as the administrative thinking of the subscription-based, mission-oriented not for profit theaters are the primary sites of drama in this country, but also from the unexpected quarters of theory and the academy. Robert Dale Parker, in his theory primer *How To Interpret Literature*, sums up both the implicit New Critical bias against politics – the deliberate insularity or “containment” of art away from the social by limiting readings to text-only considerations (13, 27) – and later, the evolution of deconstruction away from pure multiplicity of meanings to a targeting of meanings in given social or political circumstances (92). Twentieth century dramatic theory creates still other challenges for the playwright, namely in the area of dramatic form. A dramatist may indeed write a rigorous political play, but if it is not packaged in an acceptable (non-bourgeois) form, its visa may be revoked; as will be shown, out-of-hand dismissals are perhaps as common among (often doctrinaire) academic critics as they are among journalistic reviewers.

Two theorist-practitioners have driven the dominant 20th century models for political theater: Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*,

commonly translated as “alienation,” argued for critical distance in the theater – techniques that deliberately draw attention to the plastics of the theater, shattering audience illusions of (bourgeois) realism. The fear of realism is that its “uncritical” reproductions of dominant structures – social, cultural, economic, political, and, on stage, narrative/scenic/dramaturgical – reifies and naturalizes prevailing hegemonies. Making the theatrics transparent brings everything within the presentational frame into question, from the artistic medium and the audience’s role (presumably somehow more participatory) to social structures. The goal is to promote awareness within viewers that theater is a mediated display to be actively analyzed, not simply/passively enjoyed; the goal is to spark critical engagement, during the performance and beyond, on the part of the spectator/citizen. The ideal balance of Brecht’s ingredients – the epic (a sequence of discrete scenes that theoretically could be rearranged) and dialectic, his broad character types (gangsters, despots, merchants, peasants), his exotic locales (Setzuan, the Europe of the Thirty Years’ War, gangland Chicago, e.g.), the narratively interruptive, comment-laden songs – and how precisely these ingredients were practically calibrated in Brecht’s own dramaturgy all have been debated for decades. But the menu offered a clear anti-realistic model for a theater of resistance, which was resistant right down to its (largely) anti-Aristotelian form.

Boal went further. In *Theater of the Oppressed*, Boal charges that Aristotle (in *Nicomachean Ethics*) normalizes a social inequity. Because Aristotle does not begin with ideals and abstractions, but with reality, he reified the Greek reality of inequity and social stratification (Boal 22-23). Boal’s summation of Aristotle: “Tragedy imitates the actions of man’s rational soul, his passions turned into habits, in his search for happiness, which

consists in virtuous behavior, remote from the extremes, whose supreme good is justice and whose maximum expression is the Constitution” (23-24). “In the final analysis,” Boal continues, “happiness consists in obeying the laws. This is Aristotle’s message, clearly spelled out. For those who make the laws, all is well. But what about those who do not make them? Understandably, they rebel . . .” (24). Boal’s view of the Greeks takes a sinister cast as he argues that the people, in the genuinely democratic form of the chorus as they performed the ritualistic dithyrambs that were the precursors of drama, functioned as a collective protagonist, until Thespis “*invented* the protagonist,” which

immediately “aristocratized” the theater, which existed before in its popular forms of mass manifestations, parades, feasts, etc. . . . The tragic hero appears when the State begins to utilize the theater for the political purpose of coercion of the people. It should not be forgotten that the State, directly or through certain wealthy patrons, paid for the theatrical productions (33).²¹

Boal argues that Greek/Aristotelian drama purges audiences of qualities the state/society does not want, though he seems to misread Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* as an example. Stockman, the doctor who dares to announce that the waters in his spa town are poisoned, does indeed possess his society’s ethos of profit motive, as Boal asserts, but Stockman’s flaw, Boal claims, is that he is honest: “This the society cannot tolerate. The powerful impact this work usually has stems from the fact that Ibsen shows (whether intentionally or not) that societies based on profit find it impossible to foster an ‘elevated’ morality” (45). Boal argues that Stockman is destroyed because he is out of step; the eccentricity of Boal’s analysis – and illustrative of how zealously anti-Aristotelian Boal’s theory can be – comes when he reads Stockman’s destruction as coercive of the status

quo on Ibsen's part, an object lesson in maintaining social order, rather than as ferociously individualistic and muckrakingly resistant (which the irascible expatriate Ibsen certainly was, and which this play is more commonly understood to be).

Nonetheless, Boal's critique of Aristotelian principles has provided a dramaturgical template as powerful as Brecht's. Boal wrote of Aristotle's theory:

[It] does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves the purpose better than any other; if, on the contrary, we want to stimulate the spectator to transform his society, to engage in revolutionary action, in that case we will have to seek another poetics! (47).

Boal's radical poetics include doing away with the audience, going Brecht one better in terms of activating spectators. His Theater of the Oppressed makes theater-makers of the community, seeking the material issues of people's lives and developing patterns and scenarios for them to devise their own dramas, thus focusing attention, heightening consciousness, and possibly provoking social action and actual change. This has become a popular model for community engagement programs in regional theaters across America, and one that, in some minds, poses viable alternatives to the dominant modes of production. See the opening sentences of Sonja Kuflinec's *Staging America*; Kuflinec reports that she does not enjoy attending overproduced professional and academic theater, preferring the grassroots community efforts because they engage audiences more transparently and directly. The grassroots productions, she writes, give her political hope; the professional work inspires intellectual dread (Kuflinec). The

complaint implicitly suggests a question, which is whether Kuflinec's perception might be altered by a professional theater that more actively embraced a socio-political role.

The Theater of the Oppressed culminates in chapters detailing Boal's praxis, with templates for engagement/development and case histories of productions; conspicuously, the playwright is abolished. The univocality of the lone writer, for Boal, is one of the tyrannies of the Aristotelian "system." (More on the consequences of this position in Chapter Four.) The position that only radical, group-devised and group-executed forms can authentically convey radical meaning has become a dogma that playwrights can't outrun. But diagnostics about form are also commonly wielded as the "not really political" trope, a line of attack that is ostensibly about dramaturgy and its implications, but that practically results in another manifestation of the anti-political playwright habitus. Alisa Solomon, an accomplished critic and arts journalist,²² complained about "predigested dramaturgies" when she wrote in 2001,

Works by such playwrights as Kia Corthron, Rebecca Gilman, and the Tectonic Theater do not, alas, offer a dramatic experience much different from the family-in-crisis or yuppies-in-angst plays that dominate the scene; they are merely a different brand of drama, marketed for their Boldness and Urgency! their Controversy! Or, as the jacket copy of Gilman's "Spinning Into Butter" puts it, for their "surprising discoveries and painful insights" . . . [*Spinning Into Butter* and Corthron's *Force Continuum*] both could be transferred to TV without significant adjustments, while Nike, Merrill Lynch, and the local Republican Senate candidate could run commercials between scenes without feeling that their message was challenged by the program they sponsored (Solomon 5).

Ironically, a few pages on, Solomon laments the use of sarcasm as a tool “especially mobilized to dismiss dissent” (9). The subject of this critique is clear, and it ghosts Greene’s plea introducing *Front Lines*: the critic is not chiefly interested in content (which also seems to rule out the playwright as thinker, for dismissing form out of hand means not having to grapple with whatever substance might be contained by the conventional vessel), but in novel, radical, or resistant modes of “dramatic experience.”

It seems paradoxical that if efficacy and political change are desirable, television should be regarded as such a dreaded forum; the counterargument is sometimes raised that television, in fact, is where The People are. (Again, note the body of political work being amassed by HBO, a trend that is being emulated by broadcast networks.) “Strategic penetration” is leftist British playwright Trevor Griffiths’s phrase for utilizing popular forms and media to undermine authority from within. “I simply cannot understand socialist playwrights who do not devote most of their time to television,” the Griffiths has said (Patterson 67). Yet familiarity of form, or a wide public appeal via star casting in the case of Griffiths’ *The Party* – “a thoughtful and unspectacular play about left-wing politics,” according to James Patterson – can be grounds, according to this strain of the habitus, for political/dramaturgical excommunication. *The Party*, Patterson writes, provoked heartburn among the “left-wing press” because it starred top actors (including Laurence Olivier, then the Zeus of English thespians) at the National (then and now, Britain’s Parnassus) (70). For Griffiths, though, this was “strategic penetration,” taking the message to where it might be heard broadly. Patterson’s study of postwar political British playwrights also explores the strategies of playwright John McGrath, who enumerated eight principles to avoid the peril of mainstream writers “being appropriated

in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose.” The strategies included directness – “A working class audience likes to know exactly what you are trying to do or say to it” – and championed the audience-friendly elements of comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy, and localism (114-15). McGrath’s practical rationale for directness: “If you want to say something about capitalism, fucking say something about capitalism. Don’t dress it up in all this paraphernalia. Because you dress it up as allegory . . . it makes it impossible to check against reality. Or against history” (116).

In chronicling post-war British political writers, Patterson begins with a simple brief for the power of language. “Because the theater uses words,” Patterson writes, “its communication can be particularly specific and challenging” (2). In this he echoes Kushner, who, while offering respect for experimental theater and what he calls the theater of images, makes strong claims for the primacy of words in political theater. “Images are important, but words are the barricades,” Kushner claims. “Words pin us down, positionally” (“Notes” 29-30). According to a good deal of literary theory, though, they don’t. Christopher Bigsby opens his *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* with a plea for more literary scholars to focus their attention on plays, which, he suggests, as a genre have largely resisted or eluded theoretical scrutiny. Bigsby’s postmodern preference for analyzing the slippery, shifting nature of “the real” in language and narrative form is much in evidence throughout his survey, which displays a persistent bias against the “merely” topical or political. *Death of a Salesman* is not “about” capitalism, for instance; it is about the vagaries of time, the past that plagues the present. David Rabe’s 1975 *Streamers* may be a Vietnam play, but “to characterize Rabe simply as a Vietnam playwright is misleading . . . Beyond that, he addresses more fundamental

dislocations in experience” (Bigsby *Modern* 265-66). Paula Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz* is not “about” AIDS, but is a tango with Thanatos:

This is not an AIDS play, as such . . . It is not an angry play, although it acknowledges, still in parodic form, the failure of both politicians and the medical profession to respond with true seriousness: ‘if just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing [Acquired Toilet Disease] . . . that would be the last we’d hear about the space program.’ It is a play in which the sheer energy of invention is pitched against the finality which gives it birth (Bigsby *Modern* 414).

This reading, while probing, devalues the personal and social context of the play – the death of Vogel’s brother due to complications of AIDS, the continuing national pandemic – and privileges the politically dead end reaction to Death itself, bleaching away the polemics and rendering the play not universal but generic. It is, however, the *cause* of the protagonist’s death that inextricably pulls the politics well inside the drama’s purview and fully into the audience’s awareness, neither incidentally nor accidentally. *The Baltimore Waltz*, workshopped in 1990 and premiering in 1992 – exactly as Kushner was hammering his epics *Angels* into shape, as an entire genre known as AIDS plays was cresting, desperately addressing a public health epidemic that cast homophobia in life and death terms – is not a play that can be divorced from its social context and politics. But such is the tension in Bigsby between form and content; wherever content can be detected or inferred in form, it is preferred. Bigsby is on guard against what he calls “The agit-prop simplicities of revolutionary art” (Bigsby *Modern* 312), and the condescending,

form-privileging habitus is activated as he writes, “As with so much political theater of the thirties this [the concerns of the marginalized] may give such plays a social energy not matched by their theatrical sophistication or dramatic power. Writers of less than compelling talent are welcomed for their commitment rather than their skills” (319). Thus is the hierarchy made plain: “social energy,” which can be inferred as including social insight, critique, and reportage, is of lesser interest than dramaturgical complexity.

Even so, Bigsby is not resolutely anti-political. “A stage that gives back no echoes, as for many groups in America it has not, or echoes so distorted as to deform the lives of those who listen, may be said to be failing America. Can it also be said to have failed itself?” (348). He also notes, “The theater is an arena in which societies debate with themselves” (360). But the license, or visa, Bigsby grants to write with directness is reserved for the underprivileged:

The fact that the theater operates in the present tense gives it a special appeal to those who wish to mobilize present action, to become actors in their own drama Lorraine Hansberry has to have a commitment to the future. It is a cultural and political imperative. Those who possess even a limited autonomy, who can at least plausibly lay claim to the myths no less than the substance of a material life, can afford to question the meaning of such myths and realities; those who are a step and more behind cannot (275-276).

This draws the acceptable horizon of expectations for frank political plays around small particular subcultures, the economic, gender and/or ethnic left-behinds who, in Bigsby’s formulation, have not graduated to the more urbane theoretical realms because of

pressing material concerns. It is a grim irony, classifying socially-minded plays as improper for an empowered majority that presumably (but morally?) moves on intellectually with the acquisition of standing.

Marc Robinson's *The American Play* (2009) similarly subscribes to the habitus, aggressively squashing politics in its analyses. Robinson declares his project as formalist and driven by close reading (Robinson 1), but, as with Bigsby, it is with a poststructuralist's fascination for the instability of words, images, and narrative. His focus is "a formal and narrative undertow complicating one's confidence in such confrontational stances and explicit emotions" for which twentieth century American drama is typically celebrated. Robinson seeks out lack, absence, stasis: "Once acknowledged, these hollows and recesses seem to be everywhere on the American stage, pockmarking its deceptively smooth and secure surfaces" (5). Novels and paintings often take up a good deal of his concern, and the contemporary writers he chooses for real scrutiny (for Robinson disavows at the outset any ambition of an exhaustive, comprehensive survey of American drama) are thus unsurprising: Edward Albee, the David Mamet of *The Cryptogram*, Suzan-Lori Parks, and the Wallace Shawn of *The Designated Mourner*.

Inevitably, Robinson, like Bigsby, takes on Miller's *Salesman*, honing in on clothing for intricate analyses of characters and situation, deliberately scraping away at the play's national scale. "We might reasonably fear that we risk trivializing the play by focusing on a single, pedestrian aspect of production," Robinson writes. "The risk is worth incurring, if by doing so we avoid the no less regrettable fate of valuing only the metaphysical or ideological significance of its action" (277). Robinson writes in detail on

the ordinariness of clothing, and on the particularity, right down to the pajamas, that marks the figures individually, rather than as archetypes – thus diminishing, in his view, the sweeping civic aura in which we routinely receive (or shroud, in his view) the play. Such synecdoche runs counter to the archival image of Miller, the towering, iconic American dramatist habitually aiming for what Robinson reduces to the “‘important public statement’ (in Richard Gilman’s sardonic phrase)” (283). Robinson zeroes in on the imagery in *Salesman* of going to sleep, and of various personal withdrawals during the action. “Miller’s characters, never far from their own beds, shut out our claims, too,” Robinson contends. “Enlisted by virtue of the play’s fame in any number of debates over the national ‘self,’ they revert from group identity to unclassified individuality” (283). Is it really the play’s fame, though, that enlists these characters in such debates? It can be more easily argued, perhaps, that their circumstances as figures in issues of “the national ‘self’” predate the play’s induction into the canon and classroom, deriving instead from the dramatic predicament Miller pointedly devised for them. Robinson concludes by parsing the subtitle’s “certain” “private” “conversations,” each word in turn, with Willy’s climactic and final self-silencing a flight from “Miller himself and even from an American theater that expects its protagonists to be models of expressiveness on platforms for public debate” (287).

There are virtues and real discoveries in Robinson’s readings, but they often come at the expense – even as a repudiation – of context and fundamental thrust. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach note the tension between postmodernism and politics in their general introduction to *Critical Theory and Performance*, nodding to “the ongoing critique of postmodernism . . . one of the burdens of which is the slackness of its politics

amid its play of shimmering surfaces” (2). The incoherence and delusional behavior that Miller dramatizes in *Willy* and that so fascinate Bigsby and Robinson have powerful social, mercantile, public causes that add up, as Miller intended, to a profound questioning of the contours and pressures of American capitalist existence to which this protagonist (unlike Ibsen’s *Stockman*) willfully submits. The quotidian individuation that Robinson promotes is intriguing, but the conclusion reveals an open hostility toward the “merely” civic-minded without persuasively invalidating the public implications of Miller’s project. “They’re social documents,” Miller said in 1966 of the Greek dramas with which he repeatedly proclaimed an affinity, “not little piddling private conversations” (Martin 281).

Such readings as Bigsby’s and Robinson’s feed into the pattern of privileging the fragmented, the unstable, and above all the psychological, the long-ascendant element in American dramaturgy that has a history winding back through the predominance of realism that has never been seriously challenged since the deeply Ibsenesque, *fin de siècle* issue-driven dramas of James A. Herne. (Herne’s *Margaret Fleming* comes in for Robinson’s scrutiny: instability is writ all over that play, Robinson argues, not only because of the title character’s retreat into interiority but more literally because of Herne’s revisions, burned manuscripts, and an eventual much-revised rewrite from memory by Herne’s wife [Robinson 124].) As determinative as realistic dramaturgy is the profound spread of the realistic, emotionally volatile Stanislaviskian acting techniques (devised to meet the challenge of performing the subtle, character-driven dramas of Chekhov), disseminated through such high-profile entities as the Group Theater, then through what became the powerful brand of the Method, and through the wide influence

of powerful and intimate Method film acting and the success of Method stars in iconic movies and adaptations of theatrical cornerstones.²³ The rich realistic habit is the core archive of dramatic acting and writing in America over the long 20th century, and it contributes to a consistent assertion of realistic psychology as the most compelling element of dramatic character. This equation typically leads to a false binary between being “plausible” and being “political.” *Theatre of the Absurd* author Martin Esslin, in “‘Dead! And Never Called Me Mother!’: The Missing Dimension in American Drama,” identifies a kind of tyranny in the American theater’s realistic-psychological privileging of feeling: “One goes to the more ‘serious’ plays above all to be immersed in a steambath of *emotion*, and not to be made to think” (Esslin 40). Like the similarly concerned playwright Mac Wellman, Esslin views Method acting – introspective, explosively emotional, fueled in the moment by a history that is inevitably personal, not public – as a driver of playwriting habits. Esslin argues that this hierarchy is partly derived from American populism, which “rejects intellectual pretensions as elitist, and prevents the theatre from being perceived as an arena for serious ideological and philosophical discourse and discussion” (42).

For Esslin, the problem of privileging psychology becomes a question of content: American playwrights learn to buck the Millerian archive and create their own inward-looking repertoire, which results in plays of sharply diminished scale and significance. (As noted before, Bigsby thoroughly charts what he calls “the inward turn” in American playwriting, a trend harshly derided in the title of Esslin’s essay, through the family-absorbed dramas that dominated much of the 1970s and 1980s.) For Wellman, on the other hand, psychological plausibility as a litmus test of dramaturgical quality leads to a

formal straitjacket. That formula, he argues with intense regret, makes realism the only legitimate option. Wellman pushed back against these arbitrary strictures in the 1983 essay "The Theatre of Good Intentions," observing, "The odd thing about playwriting in this country is how over time the fervent attempt to capture Real Life has led to a radically impoverished dramatic vocabulary" (61). For both Esslin the critic/literary manager and Wellman the playwright, the primacy of psychology, particularly as it is linked to realism, is a daunting.

Miller felt this rift, too. His disdain for the primacy and limitation of the psychological approach was stated during a 1958 interview with Philip Gelb: "And then along came psychology to tell us that we were again the victims of drives that we weren't even conscious of, so the idea of man being willfully good or willfully bad evaporated" (Martin 213). Elsewhere, he amplified the theme:

It need hardly be said that the Greek dramatist had more than a passing interest in psychology and character on the stage. But for him these were means to a larger end, and the end was what we isolate today as social. That is, the relations of man as a social animal, rather than his definition as a separate entity, was the dramatic goal . . . I can no longer take with ultimate seriousness a drama of individual psychology written for its own sake, however full it may be of insight and precise observation. Time is moving; there is a world to make, a civilization to create that will move toward the only goal the humanistic, democratic mind can ever accept with honor (Martin 51-57).

Performance

At least the subject for Esslin, Wellman, Bigsby and Robinson is plays. The skepticism about the real and realism in literary theory extends to writing itself in performance theory, a nominally theater-centric field and one rich with implications for theatrical practice and understanding of audiences and the dynamics of performance, but one in which an interest in plays essentially disappears. Foundational is anthropologist Victor Turner's "social drama," a non-literary, intercultural study of the stages of conflict resolution (which has clear repercussions for theatrical performance). Turner's writings also pursue the liminal/liminoid, and the phenomenon of play – social, behavioral matters that need and make no reference to dramatic scripts. Richard Schechner keys many of his theories to rituals drawn from disparate cultures/cultural practices, and to the binary between efficacy (which is ritual-derived) and entertainment – forms that are not mutually exclusive, and which together comprise the realm that Schechner calls "performance." From ritual, Schechner draws the idea of "actuals," a more "authentic" mode of performance than reliance on scripted entertainments. To illustrate, Schechner invokes an aboriginal adultery ritual involving, among other things, spear-throwing, with the possibility that an especially brave young adulterer (typically challenged by an old husband) may suffer a genuine wound during the encounter. This is something real, an actual event. Schechner discusses the cultural and theatrical hunger at the time of writing (1976) for more real-ness, less artificiality, and he sets up his argument by identifying several cultural cravings motivating the changes happening around him, such as wholeness, concreteness, religious/transcendental experience. This leads him to the idea of "actualizing" – the kind of ritual made immediate in the aboriginal example – and its

application in “actuals” for the theater. Schechner delineates the five qualities of actuals: process, consequential/irrevocable acts, contest, initiation/change in status, space used concretely and organically. The Living Theatre’s *Paradise Now* in the 1960s is a prime example, with its basis in ritual and its freedom from text.

Schechner, like Turner, hones in on the liminal and ludic qualities and possibilities of performance. Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman scrutinize the concept of “play,” and while Goffman analyzes scenes and role-playing, he does so in Turner’s anthropological realm (even though an essay such as “Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptations to Failure,” rippling with hustler terminology, sounds like a blueprint for the plays and films of Mamet, right down to the businesslike rhythm of the prose). In “Self-Presentation,” Goffman delves into the dialectic of social interaction – the inevitable significance of appearances. Observations and actions dominate any encounter: a person projects a self, aware of being observed, and is thus inevitably somewhat stagy. Individuals are divided into performer and character; the character has qualities that the performer tries to convey. The performative quality of the self is key: Goffman calls it a “product” of the “scene,” and not the “cause,” thus slotting any encounter as a kind of act, with believability therefore becoming an issue.

Such are the roots of the current concerns with performance and performativity, which eventually intersect with issues of identity as performed and perceived, appropriated and resisted. This is patently of interest and value to theater practitioners. But it is a line of inquiry that need not concern itself with dramatic writing, and that frequently doesn’t. From the on-the-ground informational community creations led by anthropologist Dwight Conquergood to the theorizing of Philip Auslander’s *Liveness*:

Performance in a Mediatized Culture (which takes television and rock n' roll as its primary subjects), plays and playwrights fall outside the purview of this ascendant mode of theatrical analysis and (increasingly, with the rise of "devised" works) practice. As Joseph Roach acknowledges in the preface to his influential *Cities of the Dead*, "The pursuit of performance does not require historians to abandon the archive, but it does encourage them to spend more time in the streets" (xii). In Roach's 2007 *It*, an analysis of magnetism from Nell Gwynn to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, playwrights do not figure. They do not have "it." Johnny Depp does.

This body of academic thought, then, contributes powerfully, in its way, to yet another facet of the habitus that diminishes the playwright as thinker and even, in this case, the playwright as a valid theatrical agent. The habitus forges a hegemony that, given the intimidating/impenetrable layers involved in the system of theatrical production in the United States, is difficult, if not impossible, for writers to resist, and one that declares on its visa applications that the most reactionary, unproduceable, uninteresting or corrupt play one can write is an undisguised realistic/Aristotelian drama of topical/political ideas. Playwrights are indeed schooled in their art and its discourses, which include the voices in the *Times*, Brecht and Boal, Schechner and Auslander, etc. In fact, the phenomenon of the ranks of contemporary professional playwrights in the U.S. being drawn from a narrow handful of select graduate programs is beginning to be seen as problematic, both for the fact that an MFA in playwriting is viewed as the only legitimate gateway to professionalism and because of the suspicion that the creative lessons promulgated by these programs is rendering the art as an overly delicate and rarefied commodity (Farmer 22; London 73-75). According London's study, playwrights are emerging from

universities and onto the theatrical landscape preoccupied with matters of individual artistic voice and disconnected from an interest in the public sphere. David Dower's *Gateway of Opportunity* study, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, raises a similar issue of the effect of advanced degrees among the latest generation of playwrights:

The impact of this winnowing mechanism on the diversity and accessibility of the field shouldn't be underestimated . . . In one meeting with artists, every participant held an MFA from a top program. I asked whether the MFA was an essential badge of legitimacy in the field. An unqualified 'yes' was the answer. In fact they went so far as to say that an MFA from one of a half-dozen programs was the signifier of a real playwright – differentiating between a professional and a hobbyist. While this clearly is not the case in the field, the presumption was striking . . .

We spoke in some detail about the benefits of the MFA programs for the playwrights around the table. They agreed that these programs allowed them to find and hone their own voice as a playwright, to sharpen their individuality, and to trust their own drummer. The playwrights also spoke of their disappointment that, when they got out of school, their plays were most often relegated to small-budget productions at scrappy companies or the reading series at the major houses. If the MFA programs promote, hone, and celebrate the idiosyncratic elements of an individual's voice absent a consideration of the actual context in which plays will be evaluated outside the academy – where they meet the real-world considerations of audiences, production resources, and the specific

aesthetic interests of the gatekeepers – it does not surprise me that the major theaters deem many of the plays ‘risky to produce’ and consign them to reading series instead of subscription slots (Dower 20).

London characterizes as “militant” the language of an artistic director who charges that playwrights are too driven by their own unique voices, as opposed to looking for the commonalities with audiences (London 214). A New York City artistic director notes, “There’ve been very, very few plays that have been willing to tackle the big issues of the time . . . our most talented writers may get taught the idea that the uniqueness of their vision is more important than the size of it” (28).

Some writers in London’s study push back:

“Theaters are not interested in producing for a writer’s audience,” a leading experimental playwright asserts. “It’s not that we’re not interested in writing for their audiences. Maybe they’re defining audiences as ticket buyers, and that’s the audience I can’t write for. I have no idea who that audience is.” By this light, the theaters’ mercantile relationship with audience goes against the grain of the “collaborative engagement” sought by the playwright. Ticket buyers consume entertainment. The writer’s more ideal audience accepts the challenge to enter into a dialogue (216-17).

This suggests an arrogance and diffidence that helps explain why this ancient art, as practiced in the contemporary United States, too seldom plays a meaningful part in any national conversation. Sloughing off the Odets-Miller-Hansberry-Kushner ghosts but schooled in the habitus disavowing political realism (or even relevance) and encouraging

formal innovation and distinction, playwrights rarely even envision such a goal. The American producing apparatus, the first issuer of playwriting visas, prior to audiences and critics, represents yet another obstacle, and one that is particularly forbidding, insofar as producers represent the primary gatekeepers in the system, embracing and rejecting scripts. The “pre-performance evaluation” noted by Bennett happens pivotally in the season planning process at institutional theaters; a high-level example of such decision-making was made transparent as Arena Stage planned its 2004-05 season. Artistic director Molly Smith gathered a handful of staffers every two weeks to brainstorm around themes, systematically building and then narrowing a list of plays under consideration to fill a total of eight slots on the company’s two stages. A wary attitude toward political scripts was clear in this exchange between Smith, artistic associate Wendy Goldberg, Michael Kinghorn and Michelle Hall of the literary department, and production manager Guy Bergquist:²⁴

KINGHORN: “What have we been hearing from audiences?”

HALL: “They keep saying political. Whatever that means.”

Smith asks how many wanted political works. Hall: “About half the hands went up. But they immediately said, ‘Not too many.’” Smith asks Goldberg to probe audience about subject matter at the “Molly’s Salon” [an audience talkback forum] for *Proof*.

SMITH: “Politically, everything is changing so fast right now. I don’t think we want to do anything that’s right on the nose” (Pressley “A Season’s”).

This is the habitus at work within one of the most influential regional theaters in the country. The first thing the audience tells this flagship regional theater it wants, once asked, is what the theater administration – throughout nearly all of the American theater, the unavoidable existential link between playwrights and audiences – quickly and nimbly rules out.

Key to London's study is that the archival model of the Odets-Group Theatre relationship, with writer and company bonded in mind and deed, no longer exists, leaving writers at the mercy of the vagaries of Broadway commercial producing (rarely) or the not-for-profit regional system (commonly). In this entrenched ecosystem, which grants practically no power to the supplicant writers, London reports that artistic directors of institutional theaters routinely fault playwrights for their inattentiveness to audience concerns (2, and onward). The greater argument of London's book, though, blames the not-for-profit producing system, describing it as "inhospitable" (2). "Bodies of work go unsupported" (3); the not-for-profit theater culture is "corporate" (4); the increasingly common expansion of rising and established theatrical companies into ever-larger spaces creates capital pressures that lead to increasingly safe programming choices (5);²⁵ small second stages get built where untested new titles can be programmed for audiences increasingly wary of the unknown (128). A survey of the study is instructive: "As playwrights are assailed for 'writing small,' new plays are more and more consigned to the smallest of spaces, as if new work by its very nature can't rise to the expectations of a sweeping stage or a large audience," London writes. "The linked ecologies of new-play production and consumption have slipped into a downward spiral of diminished expectation on the part of artist, administrator, and audience alike, one that will inevitably

impoverish the art form” (183). “They [playwrights] are expected to write smaller and then criticized for lacking ambition when they do . . . Rather than challenging the assumptions of a shrinking scale for new plays, artistic directors believe that these new, smaller venues are better suited to today’s new plays” (188). Such marginalized, shrunken programming generates a lowered horizon of expectations in audiences (190). London quotes a playwright regarding the physical and programmatic marginalization imposed on writers by institutions: “Plays need height and air and depth, and you need more than fifty people to see them to even understand what’s funny, much less what’s part of the civic conversation” (191). As untested commercial commodities, new plays tend to be subjected to the tightest budgets, London reports: “As a result, the more ‘challenging, gritty stuff,’ as well as social-justice oriented work, eschewed by mainstream theaters, falls through the cracks” (173).

Thus despite the proliferation of new writing across the country in recent years, corresponding to the ever-increasing professionalization of theaters in a not-for-profit system that has been well-organized since the 1960s, the habitus of the production and administrative systems to that new work is conditioned and weakened by a fiscal and leadership forces. Within those circumstances, the subset of political writing faces still more obstacles:

Writers, especially those addressing political or social events, often work out of the fierce urgency of a moment. Ideally, they speak to the concerns of a specific audience at a specific time. In the real world of theatrical production, however, a lengthy gap exists between creating the play and getting it onstage – usually

years. This passage of time waters down a play's immediacy and disrupts direct contact with its intended audience (223).

The fear that topical works will grow obsolete in the period between selection and actual production is reinforced by something Bergquist said during the Arena planning session, that theaters find it difficult to gamble on what will be dominating headlines in thirteen months: "It might be 'Happy Days Are Here Again' or black armbands" (Pressley "A Season's").

Playwrights are aware of all of these factors. J.T. Rogers, originally the lone U.S. writer on Tricycle Theatre's *Great Game: Afghanistan* cycle, found that project and the welcoming U.K. climate so inspiring that he wrote an article in for the British press exploring why, in his opinion, such ambitious political work is scarce in the U.S. (Rogers). When Rogers departed from the project, in part because, as noted, his intended 30 minute contribution to the cycle showed potential as a full-length, stand-alone play, he was replaced by American dramatist Lee Blessing, whose best-known work is the 1988 Cold War arms negotiation drama *A Walk in the Woods*. (Blessing wrote "Wood for the Fire, CIA 1981-86" for *Great Game*.) Blessing describes the way playwrights read and respond to the American producing apparatus:

It's very hard to write political plays and live on that in this country . . .

Obviously, we have a commercially driven theater, and the not-for-profit theater acts like a commercial theater. So there aren't many theaters that feel brave enough to make that [politics] a mission for themselves . . . In commercial theater you tend to look for formulas and repeat them . . . They [political plays] don't get

written about because they don't get produced in America, I think. Writers make little enough as it is, so they have to have an eye on what will be produced (Blessing).

“For many in the theater, as we'll see,” London writes, “the greatest concern is that the art form has fallen out of a larger cultural conversation. Are playwrights beating their own retreat from the culture at large?” (220).

“Is a puzzlement,” as the King says in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*. Arthur Miller understood the challenge as long ago as 1955: “The modern playwright, at least in America, on the one hand is importuned by his most demanding audience to write importantly, while on the other he is asked not to bring onto the stage images of social function, lest he seem like a special pleader and therefore inartistic” (Martin 53). This is the casualty of the anti-political habitus, the denied visas, the diminished horizon of expectations: playwrights are blamed for not writing what the culture, loudly, consistently, and from multiple vantage points, urges them not to write.

Chapter Three

Poetics of Politics: U.K. and U.S.

Based on the ample tradition of American ghosts and repertoire, as seen in Chapter 1, the obstacles to a more positive reception and fluid, active poetics of political playwriting in the U.S. would seem to be neither inevitable nor irreversible. Nor does the anti-political critical habitus described in Chapter 2 appear unavoidable when contrasted with contemporary British reception to social/political/topical subjects on the stage. The British theatrical archive is steadily replenished with fresh scenarios in the form of national and local histories and policies re-enacted and/or contested on the stage (aka “political plays”). The tradition of social engagement is perpetually renewed by the complex but navigable process of companies that produce, writers who create, critics that accept and respond, and audiences that ratify by routinely attending and expecting work, in a variety of forms, that attacks the political moment. Visas are more freely granted for direct frontal address of governance; the theatrical borders are inclusive and encouraging of an active, flexible, rangy political dramaturgy, creating actual practice and a robust body of work. Casting these working parameters in terms of horizon of expectations, the

result sounds almost identical: the chain of production and reception, from writer through theater to critic and audience, is positive, not forbidding or discouraging of the political; the sustained positive loop reifies the pattern of topically engaged dramaturgy.

This national habitus, promoted and repeated at the highest levels of theatrical production and presentation, contributes to a poetics of political theater that has long been hospitable to stage fictions while remaining open to, and informed by, reportage techniques that recently have created a variety of strategic new opportunities (and frictions) for the drama. These techniques – docudrama, verbatim, etc. – aggressively seek to diminish the gap between real-world figures/events and their representations on the stage. In Britain, the approach to form has been multifaceted and pragmatic, not dogmatic or doctrinaire; “traditional” and so-called “bourgeois” forms (namely realism) retain as much valence as perceived radical or resistant methods. The result is a contemporary ecology rich with plays and playwrights confidently wielding visas in political realms.

An exemplar, and possibly *the* exemplar, of the political tradition in Britain, and arguably the most widely produced and recognized writer of his generation, is the prolific and formally elastic David Hare. Coterminous with the emergence of Kushner’s *Angels in America* at the Royal National Theatre, immediately prior to its triumph on Broadway, Hare also had a play on one of the National’s stages: *Murmuring Judges*, part of Hare’s ambitious trilogy at the National examining major British institutions. *New York Times* critic Frank Rich reviewed *Angels* and *Judges* together, with the lion’s share of the attention going to the breakthrough American work: “Though Mr. Hare’s and Mr. Kushner’s plays share some political sympathies and are performing side by side, the

declamatory ‘Murmuring Judges’ is so old-fashioned that one can hardly believe that it and ‘Angels in America’ were written in the same millennium” (Rich “The Reaganite Ethos”). Rich’s criticism hinged on the familiar complaint about a perceived retrograde form, privileging Kushner’s seemingly progressive method. But viewing the careers in terms of habitus and productivity, the prolix Hare, often in collaboration with the not-for-profit National (which has produced at least sixteen Hare plays in an association that dates to 1974 and *Knuckle*),²⁶ has set down a marker of formal exploration and frontal engagement that is unrivalled in American drama. Hare’s rate of production certainly has not been matched or even approached by the post-*Angels* Kushner, whose essay about the isolation of the political playwright in America was yet to come. Kushner has had notable successes in Hollywood, with the acclaimed and popular Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln* (2012) as a sterling accomplishment. But such cinematic triumphs do not influence the theatrical habitus, and an indication of playwright Kushner’s decelerated rate of original production (*Lincoln* is derived from Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*) and cultural traction in the U.S. can be seen in the fate of his play *The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism, with a Key to the Scripture*. The play premiered at Minnesota’s Guthrie Theatre in 2009, had a short run off-Broadway in New York in 2011, and three years after premiering had scarcely been picked up by the country’s extensive network of regional theaters. Going into the 2013-14 season, it was not scheduled to be seen in Washington, D.C., though as of summer 2012 Kushner’s agent confirmed to this writer that the rights were available.

Hare, like Kushner, Miller, Hellman, et. al., has also maintained a public persona beyond the stage, addressing issues of the day in his own voice. Janelle Reinelt, in

“Performing Histories: *Plenty* and *A Map of the World*,” suggests a term for playwrights as “hyper-historians,” particularly in instances in which the dramatist “engages in ongoing dialogues about his work and its interpretation, and maintains a visible presence before the public” (Reinelt “Performing” 200). Hare has been virtually as productive as Miller in terms of his extra-theatrical writing and appearances, holding platform chats, making television and radio appearances, writing newspaper articles and essays addressing the evolving state of the theater and matters of dramatic form, advancing the public debate and generally playing Reinelt’s role of hyper-historian. Hare’s basis for that manner of playwriting performativity derives from his view of the true function of the stage, which, as he told Georg Gaston in a 1993 interview, is to act as a site for society “to take a sober account of itself, and see itself truly” (Gaston 224).

This stage-as-social-mirror impulse was manifested in Hare’s earliest professional theatrical experience as a member of the Portable Theatre Company from 1968-71. The troupe was mobile, with no fixed address and very little in the way of monetary or financial resources. The circumstances suited Hare and his colleagues; Portable Theatre was consciously operating contra to what the members saw as the dominant reactionary production methods and conservatively couched stage topics. Tony Bicat, Hare’s Cambridge colleague and Portable co-founder, recalled the troupe’s objectives and methods in “Portable Theatre: ‘Fine Detail, Rough Theatre’.” At Cambridge, Hare and Bicat had run the Independent Theatre: “As the name suggests, it was in some sense an alternative to the Cambridge theatrical establishment represented by the ADC and the Marlowe Society,” Bicat writes, noting that even at university Hare “maintained a shrewd foot in both the alternative and the establishment camps” (Bicat 17). Bicat suggests that

although Portable, founded in a group flat, became known as “political,” the tag was applied because of the company’s overriding confrontational stance: “Our ‘political’ label was a convenient way for critics to generalize about very different figures and (if they were on the Right) to dismiss us” (22). Other figures who eventually would be listed among Britain’s political dramatists (Snoo Wilson, Howard Brenton) soon joined the troupe, but it was during the early stages that Hare, who had been acting as a director and impresario with Bicat, first began to self-identify within the theater as a writer. That genesis was entirely practical: “I only started writing because somebody had failed to deliver a play,” Hare has said (Gaston 214).

Bicat insightfully and amusingly details the varied and often conflicting political impulses among Portable members, but he makes it clear that despite the absence of a lockstep party line, politics in that cultural moment and among that youthful group was an inescapable part of the imperative, not least for Hare. Brenton felt it was innate with the project, ultimately driving the writers’ frontal engagement with issues: “If you set up an antagonistic theatre touring to people who have never seen the theatre before, it transforms itself into political theatre. It has a political effect. And the anarchic, antagonistic theatre becomes increasingly one of political content. This is what happened to us” (Boon “Keep” 34). “I used to believe in the word ‘should,’” Hare said in a 1991 interview. “In other words, I thought that the English theatre ‘should’ cover political subjects. And because there was nobody doing it, I kicked a lot of plays into being” (Gaston 218). However, just as the political instincts varied, so it went with technique; a rigid formal aesthetic was not part of Portable’s program. In fact, Hare’s goal was to avoid anything resembling an overt technique, a theorized form *à la* Brecht or workers’

theaters, because for Hare, foregrounding form was an impediment to conveying meaning:

We worked on a deliberately and apparently shambolic style of presentation, where people simply lurched on to stage and lurched off again, and it was impossible to make patterns. That is to say, we worked on a theatrical principle of forbidding any aesthetic at all . . . It was impossible to make aesthetic patterns, and it was impossible to apportion moral praise or blame (Boon “Keep” 35).

The motivating forces were a nation that, in the late 1960s, the young men perceived as being in crisis, and a theater that was non-responsive to the situation:

We wanted to bundle in a van and go round the country performing short, nasty little plays which would alert an otherwise dormant population to this news. And by doing so we hoped to push aside the problem of aesthetics, which we took to be the curse of the theatre. People were more interested in comparing the aesthetics of particular performances than they were in listening to the subject matter of plays. And we thought that if you pushed aesthetics out of the way by performing plays as crudely as possible, and in work places, or places where people lived, you could get a response to what you were actually saying (Gaston 214).

Brenton, quoted by Boon, recalled that “audiences became theatrically literate and the discussions afterward stopped being about the plays’ content and began to be about their style” (36). (The article Boon cites, by Jonathan Hammond from *Gambit* in 1973, has the

characteristically on-the-nose title of “Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton.”) Fears about being trapped in a self-created ghetto of “voice” and style led Hare, Brenton and others to press ahead with their “message-first” dramas toward mainstream stages, the better to convey their ideas to greater portions of the public, still adamant that form was to keep a back seat. Scott Fraser cites Hare:

We can now command the standards we want, the style of presentation that we want, there’s never any argument about how the plays are to be done, where five or six years ago there would have been. It’s always the content of the work that determines everything – which I say over and over again, and I know you don’t believe me, but it’s true! And where can ideas be most clearly presented? There has never been any bar on ideas, even in the West End (Fraser 25; the citation comes from Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, “From Portable to Joint Stock via Shaftesbury Avenue,” *Theatre Quarterly*, 5, December-February, 1975).

The long-term practical effect for Hare, who credits the Portable experience with teaching him to complete his purpose-driven scripts rapidly, is that he became a writer impossible to identify stylistically; instead, he very quickly became known, and remains identified, foremost as “political” and issue-driven. As Boon writes in the *Cambridge* introduction, Sam Mendes, director of Hare’s *The Vertical Hour* on Broadway, notes that Hare’s form sometimes follows Brecht (“the public plays about the railways, the judicial system, the church; *Stuff Happens* would be among these”), sometimes Chekhov (“which would include *Skylight*, *The Secret Rapture*, and *The Vertical Hour*” (2)). Mendes might have added Shaw as a model, for the class and policy concerns are often foregrounded more in Shaw’s conspicuously issue-limning, debate-driven manner than in Chekhov’s

understated, character-oriented style in *Skylight* (1995, about a faded romantic relationship that pivots on liberal and conservative identities), *Vertical Hour* (2006, about an American woman – a professor and one-time war correspondent – and an English doctor, debating the 2003 invasion of Iraq), *Plenty* (1978, about a woman’s disenchantment with daily life after the exhilarating national and individual sense of purpose during World War II), and *A Map of the World* (1982, about the characteristics of the first and the third worlds, set during a UNESCO conference – and also involving a film shoot as a framing device). Director and former National head Richard Eyre observes that debate is at the heart of every Hare play, “and in order to present a debate it’s necessary to present two sides to an argument. Without debate, any form of political play – and his plays are indelibly political – becomes frozen in polemic” (Eyre 146). Boon allows the distinct strands Mendes advances but makes the more important point that Hare’s own voice, consistent in its social concerns regardless of style (which has also embraced intensive reportage and pure verbatim methods) or layers of psychology, never wavers.

The lesson from Hare, then, is not a lesson in resistant or complicit forms. The conclusion appears to be that the visa Hare has claimed and has been granted to write politically is because the role of playwright as political messenger – Hare’s primary identity – is not cloaked or shunned. In fact, it is an identity without which Hare has said he cannot create plays; he endured a period lasting several years during which he stopped writing because a political confusion so intense that he grew unsure of what he could say on a stage:

That was because I was a political writer, and really, at the end of the seventies, when Margaret Thatcher arrived and we had all predicted that the world would turn left, and the world turned right, I was left looking very foolish. And so I didn't have a means of interpreting the world. The first character you have to get right in a play is yourself. Yourself: meaning from what point of view am I writing this play? Who is the person who is writing this play? Of what do they approve or disapprove, or do they not want to show their approval or disapproval at all? Who is this person writing the play? And so I was so thrown by what happened politically at the end of the seventies that I was incapable of writing about it for some years (NT 2012 video interview with Hare).

Yet Lib Taylor, "In Opposition: Hare's Response to Thatcherism," charts Hare's sustained course from *Plenty* through *Map of the World*, *Pravda*, *Secret Rapture*, to the trilogy's opener, *Murmuring Judges*, each mounting an aggressive ideological counterattack, beginning with the angry sprawling broadside *Pravda*. Thus little more than a decade after his crisis, Hare was so assured of his response to the world and of the various methodologies available to him that he was writing his trilogy interrogating British institutions for a pivotal British cultural institution (the National), and, for *Absence of War*, was even able to report from the inside on the 1992 general election campaign, having gained access to Labor candidate Neil Kinnock and his inner circle during the critical months leading up to the party's defeat. Hare's process for *Absence* would be akin to a U.S. dramatist shadowing Al Gore during the 2000 campaign from the Democratic primaries through the Supreme Court case that decided the Florida recount

(and thus the presidential election). Hare had in-the-moment access to the participants, and afterward freely claimed a dramatist's visa to create a conventional fictional play, refracting shared public history through a theatrical light. This speaks to the remarkably broad and welcoming horizon of expectations enjoyed by Hare in Britain that transcends author-reader/dramatist-audience and even the apparatus of theatrical production. The public figures of the campaign, including the opposition leader and Prime Minister candidate Kinnock, not only accepted that they would be the subjects of a playwright's stage representations: they made themselves available and transparent in the most sensitive moments to a dramatist asking around after facts.

Absence of War is a formidable example of a playwright claiming the visa to write about government/issues/policy/strategy with political authority, but it is not the only one. Hare's later such projects include his first-person *Via Dolorosa* and the reported/imagined *Stuff Happens*, about the U.S.-U.K. walkup to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. (As has been noted, *Stuff Happens*, with its onstage portrayals of governmental figures George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Condoleeza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, and others, was deemed too controversial to be fully professionally staged in many U.S. cities, including Washington, D.C. – a profound instance of the rejected visa and restricted horizons.) Fact-based political material has deep roots in the early 20th century movement of workers theaters (explored later in this chapter), a tradition that took significant root in Britain between the wars, and, in the U.S., where the history of informative, public-spirited, quasi-documentary-style drama reached a peak with the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers. Hare himself had learned how to incorporate reportage into dramatic writing as a member of the Joint Stock Theatre

Company, which he founded in 1974 with director Max Stafford-Clark, among others; the troupe's process of researching, interviewing and workshopping became known as the Joint Stock Method. As will be seen in the next chapter, the output of reporting-based and verbatim dramatic writing increased remarkably on both sides of the Atlantic in the two decades following *Angels*, Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* and Hare's *Absence of War*, arguably making Smith's method (in terms of interviewing and writing, if not performing) the most influential among these three works that aggressively, but differently, depict history on the stage.

But what Hare made of his reporting for *Absence of War* was not a docudrama or a verbatim play; however thin the veil that drapes the reportage, the characters are fictional. In *Angels*, Kushner used actual historical figures to bring political immediacy to his fantasia, taking liberties to create a ferocious, live Roy Cohn and his wry nemesis, a dead Ethel Rosenberg. For *Absence*, Hare burrowed inside Kinnock's unsuccessful campaign, and he chronicled his years of research for this and the other dramas in his trilogy (*Murmuring Judges* and *Racing Demon*) in his journal *Asking Around: Background to the David Hare Trilogy* (1993). The title declares the dramatist's reportage, modeling the playwright as an artist liberated from the garret or the cloistered study and covering the streets and political back rooms. The journal reads much as Hare's 1997 *Via Dolorosa* plays in performance. With practically no theatrical trappings, the conversational one-man *Via Dolorosa* chronicles Hare's fact-finding trip to the Middle East, acknowledging his own British framework of understanding, describing found conditions from landscapes and cityscapes to economic facts and religious atmosphere, converting his own conversations with the historical disputants into edited verbatim

dialogue. The intense similarity between the published journal *Asking Around* and the performed *Via Dolorosa* is underlined by the fact that in both the U.K. (1998) and the U.S. (1999), Hare initially acted *Via Dolorosa* himself. Thus the difference between the two notebooks comes down to little more than whether one is a reader or a spectator, absorbing the author's questioning and judging, first-person analytical voice from the page or from the stage. For Hare there is scant difference: his own performative presence as an artist interrogating living conditions, politics and responsive governance ("Who is the person who is writing this play?") is paramount.

Asking Around is a chronological journal, with the passages on *Absence* coming last. They have the characteristically gripping quality that accrues to behind-the-scenes accounts of high stakes political campaigns, and, like a number of his own dramas but also like *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward's chain of books about Washington politics and institutions, it creates deep character studies, sketches of political engagement and of political avoidance, depictions of policy debates and of policy failures. The title Hare eventually chooses for his trilogy's capstone, *Absence of War*, is explained during a conversation between Hare and Neil Stewart, Kinnock's political secretary, discussing the ways people derive a sense of personal worth. It is a variation of the *Plenty* thesis:

HARE. "To me, it's a substitute for war."

STEWART. "What do you mean?"

HARE. "People overwork like crazy and hope it will give them some sense of personal worth" (Hare *Asking* 188).

The conversation imitates dramatic dialogue, but also replicates the brand of fly-on-the-wall reportage of which Woodward is possibly the most exemplary American figure. Hare's presence in the conversations is, like Woodward's, that of an opposite but equal – a status routinely, necessarily claimed and exercised by reporters, but rarely by (particularly American) dramatists. Hare begins by describing the wide public belief that Kinnock's campaign was boring, and that Labor doomed itself early by losing a public relations battle about its tax policies. (The plan included some hikes, but the ideas were so unpopular across the board that it was judged better to divert the campaign narrative away from any talk of taxes.) Hare on the boredom thesis: "I am not sure about this. When people say something is boring, it sometimes means they themselves cannot find a fresh way of looking at it" (Hare *Asking* 163). Early on, the campaign considers a strategy to deal early with "losing" issues (namely taxes) and then revert to Labor's strength in the "caring" issues such as health and education: "The plan, then, is not to change people's minds – too late for that, they say – but to control the agenda" (183). Stewart raises the issue of the Leader's office, known as the Shadow Cabinet, and its role, to answer Hare's question about why Labor isn't running the campaign: "Because things wouldn't get done. Because Neil's determination would get diluted" (189). In *Absence*, this issue drives the central dramatic questions: who has control of the campaign and of the candidate; can the effort be effective; can it have a soul?

Hare's post-mortems in the journal are especially insightful. He publishes some of the off-the-record chats, not naming names but detailing the quest, after watching often questionable public political performances in speeches, televised encounters, etc., for "explanations . . . which were sometimes economic, sometimes political, but most often

psychological” (238). The inquiries pursue a number of problems hobbling the Kinnock campaign, including the general lack of self-confidence within the Labor Party, the unwillingness to be seen as split internally on any given policy (something Conservatives somehow have license to do, it is noted), the paradoxical and near-paralyzing observation that the public generally aligns with Labor’s core positions yet historically does not support those propositions when they emanate from Labor, and the problem of Kinnock’s sometimes undisguised anger and his personal isolation from the party. Press secretary Julie Hall asserts that the effort to keep Kinnock strictly “on message” was part of the problem; her own message was, Hare writes, “Be yourself. But there were also pressures on him not to be his natural self, to hold himself in. And the fact is, the more people saw the real Neil – the more they got to know him – the more they liked him” (Hare *Asking* 227). Not surprisingly, the post-mortem with Kinnock after the campaign defeat is particularly intriguing; the candidate freely acknowledges his temper, blames the media for what he sees as a double standard toward the two parties, defends his staff while asserting that the party erred by not having a key policy formed even late in the campaign, even though the election was known to be looming: “Not enough of the bloody work had been done” (236). Kinnock considers whether he might have been more blunt with the public, disclosing the dire economic conditions, and explains the risk of being seen as a doomsayer; but he adds, “It was in part our fault. We hadn’t worked long enough. You mustn’t just work hard in politics, you must work long as well” (238). In short, the reportage of *Asking Around* amply collected and began to organize the themes and the conflicted, flawed individual and national character Hare would anatomize in the lightly fictionalized drama *Absence of War*.

In *David Hare: Moral and Historical Perspectives* (1996), Finlay Donesky argues that Hare's proximity to the dominant political system, evident in the non-fiction and the dramas' subjects but also in theatrical conclusions that stop well short of proposing overthrow, suggests a view of Hare as complicit with the corrupt systems he appears to critique. Donesky claims of the trilogy that "Hare assumes – as he usually does – an enlightened position within the status quo" (170), suggesting Hare never entertains the possibility of alternative systems of governance because he has reported only on insiders, not on resisters; he finds Hare's "objective in the trilogy is to re-enchant the relationship between the British and their institutions" (181). "The crucial point," Donesky concludes, "is that Hare is not interested in advocating social change in these three plays. Rather, he has openly become a conserver and refresher of the status quo" (183). The argument presumes a philosophical goal that Hare flatly does not share; Hare's political aim, while rarely stated directly in the plays and which necessarily shifts depending on the topic being addressed, may not be overthrow, but it is certainly social change. (A sample of the range of topics: British journalism in *Pravda* [1986], the church and the courts in the trilogy's *Racing Demon* and *Murmuring Judges*, respectively, the privatization of the rail system in *The Permanent Way* [2004], religion and political fundraising in *Gethsemane* [2008], and the roots of the 2007-08 financial crisis in *The Power of Yes* [2009]). As Donesky notes, Hare claims the focus of his career shifted when he realized that it was not enough for his writing to be merely contra, but that it must also contain the suggestion of or potential for positive advance, a recognition that occurred in *Knuckle* (1974) and *Teeth n' Smiles* (1975). With *Knuckle*, Hare attempted to move beyond angry, "forgettable" satire and "write a play which was available to everybody" (Donesky 26,

quoting Hare in a statement that is tantamount to a playwright beginning to applying for a visa as a political writer). Judy Lee Oliva's *David Hare: Theatricalizing Politics* includes her 1989 interview with Hare, in which he said about the change of tactics in *Knuckle*, "Up till then I was writing purely satirical work. The point of it was to make fun of ideas, or people, or points of view. There's nothing constructive in my work [then]" (Oliva 165). Donesky writes, "These plays [*Knuckle* and *Teeth*] affirm the paradoxical terms of the consensual political and moral framework in which solitary individuals believe in national suprapartisan values in the process of lamenting the loss of them" (Donesky 31).

This shift in stance toward affirmative national belief is foundational for Hare and has been enduring. As will be seen, the posture allows for dramatic characterization, nuance, and internal conflict, while keeping at bay the two-dimensional broadsides, caricatures and stereotypes of agit-prop. It is a drama of engagement, not detachment and (at least not wholesale) disenchantment; Hare accepts the inescapable existential fact of government, addressing it not as a monolithic, faceless, inalterable hegemony but as a peopled organization steered by human decision making and therefore capable of change. The demand of the plays is for ethical understanding and moral discrimination, for enhanced apprehension of the connection between personal choices and public outcomes, and for responsiveness from the individuals running the public's institutions. The result is a non-reductive, non-polemical political dramaturgy that recognizes, explores, embraces and laments the human complexity of democratic government, a dramaturgy that accepts a citizen-like responsibility of engagement; it is the opposite of a resistant dramaturgy of ridicule and retreat, and is possible only because of a public and producing habitus of tolerance (at minimum) of political ideas in the marketplace of the stage, a horizon of

expectations wide enough that theaters, audiences and critics routinely stamp the playwright's visa for entry into those realms. "In these early plays," Donesky writes of the 1960s and early 1970s works, "Hare sees the 'field of culture' as a wasteland rather than a battlefield" (Donesky 24). Hare's body of work, to be contrasted shortly with plays from the first decade of the new millennium by Miller and Mamet, suggests that the difference between the "wasteland" and "battlefield" views creates an essential separation between satire and drama and/or tragedy, and between immature and mature (in Hare's view) stage representations of people and politics:

Hemingway said politics in literature were the bits that readers would skip in fifty years' time. We all know what he meant. But a sense of politics seems to me no more nor less than part of being adult. When I first worked in theatre, the prevailing fashion was for plays set in rooms, in which characters arrived with no past and no future. Human beings, it was implied, lived primarily inside their own heads. This seemed to me to offer not just a boring but an untrue view of life. In all the works I most admired, writers gave me a sense of how history pulls us this way and that, of how we live among one another, and how everything in our personal, even our spiritual lives is affected by how we came to be who we are (Hare *Writing Left-Handed* xiv).

The poetics of Hare's politics has been multifaceted for so long that in 1996 Scott Fraser ventured an original taxonomy of the plays in *A Politic Theatre: The Drama of David Hare*. Fraser, staking out the same respectful yet (slightly) skeptical territory claimed by Donesky, ultimately (though unconvincingly) concludes that Hare's political

view gravitates toward black/white dualism and fails because it posits no solutions (153).

But his larger and greater project is to limn the definitions he proposes. Fraser quotes

Hare's touchstone plays-and-politics "A Lecture" from 1978:

Why the insulting insistence in so much political theatre that a few gimcrack mottoes of the Left will sort out the deep problems of reaction in modern England? Why the urge to caricature? Why the deadly stiffness of limb? . . . [If] a play is to be a weapon in the class struggle, then that weapon is not going to be the things you are saying; it is the interaction of what you are saying and what the audience is thinking (Fraser 7).

Fraser then writes:

Accordingly, the works of David Hare do not simply preach to the politically converted or alienate the politically complacent. Rather, they create a complex dialectic between dramatic structure and implicit socialist critique through a subversion of audience expectations. The dramatic structure of each Hare text is often a reworking of the style of an earlier dramatic genre (such as the well-made play), traditional narrative construct (such as detective fiction), or collective mythology (the history of the Second World War) . . . by placing individual experience in conflict with the contextual frame, the texts implicitly subvert the aesthetic and, by association, political status quo (Fraser 7).

Fraser's project posits five categories for Hare's oeuvre: juvenilia, satirical anatomies, demythologies, martyrologies, and conversions. The early plays fit the first two categories, which deal with characters that are not necessarily political; Fraser cites a critic describing the figures as "pre-political animals," yet the persistent theme is moral decay, which, Fraser asserts, ultimately renders them as political: "As David Ian Rabey has defined it in *British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century* (1986), political drama is 'that which views specific social abuses as symptomatic of a deeper illness, namely injustice and anomalies at the heart of society's basic power structure'" (18). Again citing the 1978 "A Lecture," Fraser notes that Hare was pivotally influenced by Angus Calder's *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (1969), which is of interest for its establishment in the playwright's mind of the potential for alternative histories.²⁷ That development leads to Fraser's "demythologies" category of plays that do indeed provide alternative histories (*Fanshen, Plenty, Licking Hitler, Saigon*), working through public upheaval "to illustrate the influence of public political change on the private individual" (111). Fraser cites Hare:

I suppose that what [my] plays conclude . . . is that not to be able to give your consent to a society will drive you mad, but, on the other hand, to consent will mean acquiescence in the most appalling lassitude. The choice tends to be dramatized in the plays as isolation – sometimes madness – or the most ignominious absorption (Fraser 111).

Hare moves from "alternative histories" to "martyrologies," which are distinct from satirical anatomies in their increased seriousness and privileging of the protagonist's

viewpoint (111-12). Fraser argues that Hare solicits empathy for the protagonist “emblematic of an alternative political ideology,” while the plot subverts genre and audience expectations by denying individual or political triumphs. Fraser makes the plays sound like inverted melodramas: “In simple terms,” Fraser writes, “the good guy gets it” (112). The “conversions” category includes *A Map of the World* and *The Secret Rapture*; “The individual is capable of engendering at least private change in the conservative emblem . . . Objective adherence to ideology is replaced by faith, and politics becomes a question of the soul” (199). By the end of the analysis, Fraser returns to Hare’s 1978 claim “There has never been any bar on ideas, even in the West End,” finding that through 1990, at least, Hare’s position was consistent.

In Fraser’s terms *The Absence of War* can be categorized as both a martyrology – George Jones, the personable, principled, brilliant yet flawed Kinnock figure, loses the election, sacrificed by internal party machinations – and a conversion: George remains the soulful figure of a potentially alternative governance, and if only he were blessed with the capacity to act positively on his ideals, change within the system may have been realized. (The name of the fictional leader being scrutinized, George, is so freighted with monarchical and presidential history as to be practically a generic U.K.-U.S. signifier for “ruler.”) More generally, the structure of the piece employs Brechtian alienation and Shavian debate²⁸ for its complex representation – a portraiture seldom attempted Stateside post-*Angels/Slavs!* – of campaigning, political demographics, and electoral history. Like Kushner’s *Slavs!*, *Absence* interrogates governance and ultimately asks “What is to be done?”²⁹ with the primary difference between the plays that Hare focuses not partly but entirely on the people doing the governing (George and his Shadow

Cabinet are elected Members of Parliament). Hare also declines the distance of refracting his observations through heightened theatrical techniques (recall Kushner's opening vaudeville)³⁰ or through the studied contemplation of an alternate political model (Kushner examining not Americans but the Soviet experiment in *Slavs!*), instead diagnosing his own nation's process through the campaign efforts of a government-in-waiting, depicted largely through the lens of realism. The play opens with a memorial service at Whitehall's Cenotaph, invoking the military not only as a metaphor for the political strategizing dramatized throughout the play but also quickly putting into dialogue Hare's *Plenty* idea,³¹ activated by Jones's "sweeper" (an advance man and speechwriter), Andrew Buchan, in a short passage of direct address: "I have a theory. People of my age, we did not fight in a war. If you fought in a war, you have some sense of personal worth. So now we seek it by keeping busy. We work and hope we will feel we do good" (*Absence* act 1 scene 1). (The near exactitude of this statement to Hare's own in *Asking Around* does not make Andrew the play's *raisonneur*; no single figure fits that bill.) This notion will serve as an indictment of the activities Hare depicts, which, after the opening memorial service and Andrew's brief speech, open up on backroom encounters, increasingly hectic and fevered and anticipating the brand of high-pressure, knowing, idealized political dialogue (rapid back-and-forth exchanges that yield to shapely, high-minded speeches) popularized in the U.S. by Aaron Sorkin's television series *The West Wing*. The play's tension is built on the tactical, ethical and spiritual conflicts swirling around the Good Man who is possibly destined to fail, paralleling Greek or Shakespearean tragedy: the audience, of course, already knows the fate of this doomed hero. George is seen as a vessel of virtue and of progressive ideas, the very man

who has invigorated the chronically flailing Labour to the point that the sturdy Conservative lock on government might finally be shaken (early in the play, polls put Labour six points ahead of the Tories), yet a leader whose popularity has a mysterious ceiling. Lindsay Fontaine, a newcomer to Jones's inner circle who is being considered as the campaign's new head of advertising, summarizes the dilemma: "You meet George, you think: 'this man is dynamite.' So then you ask the next question. Why on earth does this never quite come across?"

As the characters enter and banter, Hare establishes and exploits the conventions of the well-made play; with the introduction of a stranger into the tight professional circle, Hare's exposition is masked and unforced, with colorful characterizations of Jones delivered by a staff (introduced one by one) that briskly sum up the electoral situation. Gwenda Aaron, George's hyperactive secretary – the stage direction describes Gwenda as "barely ever still," one of the play's subtle, accumulating dramatizations of the political class's self-important busy-ness – offers the first of the many tactics that will be declared and disputed, debated in the Shavian manner (though with less self-conscious panache and wit, and greater dramatic intensity): "There's one rule with George. Never slacken the leash." After the memorial comes brief Brechtian direct address, and the claim for viewing this device as notably Brechtian is strengthened insofar as Hare declines to allow the audience an opportunity to identify consistently with any single character through the several direct addresses to come. No figure speaks to the audience more than once, and seven different characters do it through the course of the play, not including Jones's climactic second act rally speech and two brief public addresses by Prime Minister Charles Kendrick. Yet the device also suggests the well-made play's *raisonneur* – not

Buchan, in the first instance, parroting Hare, as noted before, but with the direct speech temporarily but inarguably privileging each character's moment of insight or wisdom. Hare's technique then shifts to short exchanges of dialogue, argumentative sentences with the cadence of Greek stichomythia:

ANDREW. Malcolm, I'm afraid I have to tell you George is out of control.

(Malcolm turns at once to his political assistant.)

BRUCE. There we are.

MALCOLM. I see.

ANDREW. Yeah.

BRUCE. I told you . . .

MALCOLM. You *said*, Bruce, you said you smelt this . . .

BRUCE. Honestly!

ANDREW. It's nothing serious. For goodness' sake, he always comes back. Off for some tobacco and he legged it (act 1 scene 1).

Thus mere minutes into the drama, Hare employs multiple dramatic strategies under the big tent canvas of realism and the well-made play to efficiently establish his theme of the ontological/performative paradox of being a candidate.

As the Julie Hall figure, Lindsay asserts advertising as a dominant problem; chatting with Malcolm Pryce, the Shadow Chancellor (the party's second most powerful figure behind Jones, the Opposition Leader), Lindsay is skeptically told of dreadful record of previous advertising strategists, and she replies with a revealing verb: "You can't fight an election without professional help." Malcolm, momentarily appearing

idealistic, a kind of political Puritan, voices disdain for advertising: “Some of us – that includes me – believe if your policy is right . . . if it corresponds to people’s own experience . . . if it will fulfill real need in people’s lives . . . as I believe ours will, Andrew . . . Then we need not waste time on the design of the envelope, so long as we trust the document inside.” (Ironically, it is Malcolm who enters insisting on the kind of “message control,” without using that now-common phrase, that is routinely parsed twenty years later on nightly cable TV news shows, demanding of the staff that he and Jones be “watertight” in their public utterances. It is also Malcolm who will need his handler to resolve answer such fundamental political ontologies as “where am I going? What am I doing? What people?” as he exits toward his day’s events.) Lindsay politely rebuts Malcolm’s idealism three lines later: “I’m not sure things are that simple . . .”

Indeed, Hare complicates the theme of political image vs. substance by introducing the stage, with its role-playing and complexities of “character,” as a deep interest of George’s. “George loves the theater,” we learn in the opening moments, and very shortly after he makes his first appearance, he declines to study a “technology and transport in Europe” brief, instead standing apart to lecture charismatically on Moliere: “You don’t go to the theatre; you’re missing out there, everyone in politics should – in Moliere it’s always the maid I like best . . . What’s great is, her mistress doesn’t have to get excited. The maid does it for her, you see . . . That’s you lot. You’re the maids . . . you’re all of a tizz in order that I may be calm” (act 1 scene 4). Invocations of Shakespeare are thick on the ground. *Julius Caesar* is ghosted as Malcolm betrays George; Malcolm sets up his leader for metaphorical murder via television interview by providing the interviewer, known to be hostile to George, with damning information

about the party's secret plan to repeal mortgage tax relief. Two more crowned heads are reared: After Lindsay is hired, she delivers a brief speech in direct address: "George talked about everything except the actual job. As I remember we talked about why nowadays there are five productions of *Richard III* to every one of *Henry V*" (act 1 scene 5). The influence of *Hamlet* grows strong: The day the general election is called, Jones gripes that he will have to forego his *Hamlet* seats that evening, then performs a spontaneous and unsettling Greek acceptance of his fate. As the staff panics and bickers over the unexpected news, Hare's stage direction reads, "George lifts his arms to the skies and dances." George's line: "Oh God, let it come, yes, let it come, let it come now. Please God let it come" (act 1 scene 6). This accurately foreshadows the campaign as a kind of death, with George, like Hamlet, suffering from a tragically malleable identity; even the lines evoke Hamlet as George quickly shifts from the prince's first act mood of "O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right" to the fifth act's "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all." The references sometimes register as jokes, yet they are troubling insofar as they reveal a man having difficulty playing any serious part at all, and the drama increasingly seems to hinge upon whether a political leader must be (cynically) scripted or can be spontaneous, displaying the "soul" Fraser identifies as the subject of the "conversion" dramas.

Hare gives us reason to believe in George's quality and potential via the murmured refrains to that effect by the group, but also through one of the play's few displays of true passion, delivered by the most loyal of figures, Labour MP Bryden Thomas, who momentarily silences critiques of the leader with a speech about the

pressure of being the party that never wins; Bryden is finally overwhelmed as he talks about George's sterling nature ("decent," "total integrity," "His authority stems from his personal character," "He's unspoilt") (act 1 scene 6). The Good Man George's oratorical and improvisational skills are praised: Hare shows him triumphing in the House of Commons during Question Time (his vague critique of Conservative ineffectiveness gains approval when he thunders at the climax, "Please tell us how long?" [act 1 scene 3], and he boasts certain portions of the remarks were "off the cuff" [act 1 scene 4]). But George's oratorical Achilles' heel is a penchant for gaffes that is deeply dreaded by his staff and amply dramatized throughout the play. Privately, George delivers a bad joke about Cesarean sections and the German language (act 1 scene 6); political advisor Oliver Dix praises Jones's exceptional social vision, yet adds, "But – if we must identify a political weakness – he cannot in public always give those ideas articulate expression . . . We keep George moving. We brief very hard. He learns his lines and he sticks to them" (act 1 scene 6); George acknowledges he "rambled" during a television appearance (act 1 scene 6). The play crests on two badly handled public appearances: the crisis of the increasingly tetchy television interview during which Jones is ambushed with a question about the party's undisclosed plan to abolish mortgage tax relief (act 2 scene 3), and the second major crisis when, during a campaign rally, the sinking Jones finally tests Lindsay's proposed strategy of connecting with the public by "speaking from the heart" (she argues that his team "lost sight of who you really are," and that the handlers over-buffer him with too much "nursing"; "The public aren't stupid. They know he's been programmed" [act 2 scene 7]). The result of George's extemporizing before a large crowd is momentarily inspiring, but, out of practice, the candidate cannot sustain the rhetorical

momentum. His defeat is in stammering and reaching into his pocket for Andrew's scripted speech (act 2 scene 8).

The plot may appear to dramatize the shopworn political conundrum of advertised, "packaged" show vs. substance, but it achieves urgency by the fact that it is an unresolved social complaint that has only grown more acute in the decades since the play's premiere,³² and by the play's exceptional proximity, documented in *Asking Around*, to immediate British history. Hare's fiction only slightly relies on political melodrama, naturalizing its characters' occupational opposition to Conservatives but also ridiculing the sitting P.M. through Kendrick's brief craven speeches (the only streaks of satire in the play) and through George's climactic rant lamenting his and Labour's chronic failures. Yet the conflict is largely interior a) to Labour, refracting the multiplicity of conflicting viewpoints, strategies and tactics that eventually shatter the effort, and b) to George, whose flaws are not refuted during Malcolm's devastating diagnosis: in fact, the leader's weaknesses are confirmed by the public performances. This two-man ideological confrontation between Malcolm and George is the well-made play's stark yet emotionally flamboyant *scene a faire*: Eyre argues that Hare's strength comes from being able to understand and dramatize his political rivals, and that the opposing ideologies within the plays inevitably must square off; Eyre also reports that Hare himself labels these climactic meetings as *scenes a faire* (Eyre 146), indicating a conscious embrace of the melodrama and well-made forms. This showdown is played, according to the stage direction, "across the great space" of an airplane hangar (act 2 scene 6). The candor escalates when George prods Malcolm, saying, "Go ahead. We've spent years not having this talk," and Malcolm charges, "You can't cut it." George

counters that that's the myth, but argues the job of Leader is impossible knowing one is not backed to the hilt: "It's friendly fire that destroys you. We all go down to the shots from behind. Because this Party never learns. Not really. Finally, it's only interested in its own sense of what's right. It gives its love only to its dreamers. It never cares if they're effective or not" (84). Malcolm, ever full of secrets, replies with a crippling parry, disclosing that a Party faction nearly acted to remove George:

These very people still love you, even while they despair of you. They said George deserves this . . . He deserves one more shot at this thing. If you ask me why, I would say our reasons were honorable. The Tories get rid of their leaders when it's clear they might not win. But we hold on to ours . . . It's not that the Party don't believe in you, you know. I say this in love. They smell that you don't believe in yourself (act 2 scene 6).

Hare lets that characterization dangle in the air as Malcolm exits and George remains alone on stage. The long scene implicates both the party and the flawed individual in the electoral failure (which, as of the Malcolm-George argument, was not yet sealed) without resolving the tactical dispute. Critically, Hare does not exempt the public, unseen though they are (save for such minor and extremely rare appearances as that of a waitress, who ruthlessly serves the defeated George a salt-in-the-wound insult: "You're not anyone special" [act 2 scene 11]). Oliver says, "We're meant to believe in the wisdom of the people. But the truth is, the people do stupid things," and George agrees: "You can never depend on them" (act 1 scene 5). After his near-disastrous "from the heart" speech, George, who has been seen on a large stage to have no meaningful

words at his command, immediately explodes that the problem is that he is forbidden (by what could be posited as a political habitus) from stating plainly the nation's actual ills. *Verboten*, he rants, is honest talk of Northern Ireland, of Britain's historical decline, of the practical and moral imperative to abandon nuclear weapons ("But of course if I say it, that's fifty thousand jobs . . ." [act 2 scene 9]), of the threatening economy, of the absurdity of sustaining the figurehead royals. As George demands, "Is this my fault? Or is it the public's?" Gwenda shouts at him that he must publically say that everything is going well, to which George replies, "Well it is! It's all going wonderfully! Everything's going absolutely great! Within the confines of what I may say to them, I am bloody well doing as well as I can!" (scene 9).

The role of the public complicates Hare's position in "The Play Is In the Air: On Political Theatre" (1978), when he said, "I would suggest crudely that one of the reasons for the theatre's possible authority, and for its recent general drift toward politics, is its unique suitability to illustrating an age in which men's ideals and men's practice bear no relation to each other" (*Writing Left-Handed* 26). The play concludes back at the Cenotaph with a critique of Labour's/George's/Britain's inability to replicate the military's efficacy; having cinematically swept the audience through encounters in political back rooms, legislative chambers, television studios, etc. – twenty-three scenes in a rangy, robust stage representation of the public and private spaces that comprise political life – Hare leaves the audience to contemplate the causes of the wreckage of George's gleaming potential. It is a potential – not merely George's own, but as leader, his party's, and thus implicitly his nation's – that Hare shrewdly dramatized as truant upon George's very entrance, which comes with this stage direction: "The quiet sparkle

in his manner makes it plain he knows the anxiety he has caused by his absence” (act 1 scene 2).

Britain has a formidable stage genre – a habitus – for which the U.S. has no substantial counterpart: the State of the Nation play. Hare’s *Plenty* has long been championed as one of the most penetrating and original of such works (“*Plenty*: Hare’s Definitive State-of-the-Nation Play” is the title of Donesky’s sixth chapter), which, precisely as the generic name indicates, assays the country’s character. (Kushner’s *Angels in America*, with its across-the-spectrum gallery of characters intersecting during a contemporary health/moral crisis, qualifies as a state-of-the-nation play; *Slavs!*, with its focus on socialism and USSR history, fits the definition as well, though for the U.S.S.R., not the U.S.) *Absence of War* and the trilogy itself plainly push the State of the Nation drama to epic limits; Boon writes that the trilogy is “arguably the ultimate ‘State of the Nation’ project” (Boon Introduction 6). The category has been recognized at least since the early 1970s; the long tradition and continued practice of that specialized type of play is a significant factor contributing to a welcoming horizon of expectations for critics, audiences, playwrights, producers (not least among them the country’s most prestigious and visible theater, the National – which, significantly, also has no counterpart in the market-driven and/or regional fiefdoms of the U.S.). The genre confirms an acceptance and even an expectation of the political on the British stage, a welcoming horizon and firm habitus that grants writers an unquestioned and perpetually renewed political voice/visa.

Ten years after Hare’s trilogy at the National, all three plays were revived by the Birmingham Rep. “In 1993 David Hare’s trilogy about contemporary Britain at the

National Theatre showed that a major public stage could be used to address the state of the nation,” Michael Billington wrote in the *Guardian*, arguing not that the plays’ time-stamp had expired, but instead claiming that the long view revealed “a richer dimension” (“Modern”). Billington goes on to analyze how the revived *Absence of War* reveals ongoing problems with Labor leadership, fluent in party schisms and infighting going back to 1950s:

What also becomes blindingly clear, 10 years on, is that *The Absence of War* is much more than a piece of skilled reporting. It is actually cast as a classic tragedy. I remember Hare claiming as much in an ill-tempered, late-night TV discussion in 1993 with myself and two other *Guardian* journalists. At the time his argument was dismissed but one can now see that he is attempting something that Friedrich von Schiller achieved in plays like *Wallenstein* and *Don Carlos*: to combine a study of the political process with the story of a doomed individual.

Even *Racing Demon*, Hare’s play about the Church of England, operates on the same principle, as both an institutional metaphor and a solo tragedy. Its hero, Lionel Espy, is a doubting cleric who is far more concerned with the church’s social commitments than its sacramental obligations; as a result he is banished from the team-ministry he has created in south London. And, lest we miss the point that this is a clash between the individual conscience and an entrenched system, Hare even includes a scene lifted directly from Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*: at a crucial point Lionel is confronted by the Bishop of Southwark who, as he dons his ecclesiastical robes and mitre, becomes progressively more authoritarian. As played by a subversively soft-spoken Jack Shepherd and an increasingly

militant Hugh Ross, that scene showed the personal blending with the theological to create the effect of tragedy (“Modern”).

Hare’s frame in the trilogy was a history so immediately recent as to be practically the present, thanks to each play’s roots in reportage,³³ but he has clear views on the dramaturgical advantages of a longer lens, namely the ability to dramatize the movement of history. As Donesky notes, “The writer can offer a record of movement and change”; taking *Plenty* as an example, he continues, “The structure and movement of the play counterpoint each stage of her [Susan Traherne’s] long descent into madness with specific historic realities so that the cause of her madness is found in society as much as herself” (66-67). Hare, in *Writing Left-Handed*, champions the diagnostic capability of the drama in highly aggressive terms: “Indeed, if you want to understand the social history of Britain since the war, then your time will be better spent studying the plays of the period – from *The Entertainer* and *Separate Tables* through to the present day – than by looking at any comparable documentary source” (xi-xii).

Again, the richness of a habitus that allows topical/historical dramatists to flourish is due in no small measure to the indispensable role played by the producing apparatus. In 1984 Hare was named an associate director of the National with a specific mandate to create work on “public subjects” (Taylor 53), and while Hare is not England’s only political playwright and the National is not Britain’s only company producing political work, the scope of the attention they command is critical in setting benchmarks for the British stage. Ben Ockrent, still in his 20s when he contributed “Honey” (dealing with the period from 1996 to 9/11/2001) to the Tricycle Theatre’s *The Great Game: Afghanistan*

cycle, said as the project came to the U.S. in 2010 that politics is “Something I’m very interested in . . . It’s possible to find places for your work. I have friends who write exclusively political stuff. It is possible to have identity as a political playwright.” Ockrent specifically cited the influence of the National and Hare and their “rich tradition. The RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company] has done a lot of it as well. It’s not feared” (Ockrent).

Because the habitus/horizon does not regard political works as rarities or intruders, the field is vigorous and varied, and British writers are not shackled by dogmas of dramatic form. Donesky, placing Hare in a tradition that stretches back to the 1950s works of Terrence Rattigan and John Osborne, writes, “None of the work of these three playwrights is notably innovative technically (variations on the well-made play and comedy of manners). What sets them apart is how they register the spirit of their time in the emotional and psychological states of their central characters.” He contrasts Hare with Edward Bond, McGrath, Trevor Griffiths, and Howard Brenton to make the point that Hare can write angrily but, unlike the others, rarely is didactic, a tactic (or perhaps a trait) that Donesky reasonably suggests accounts for Hare’s mainstream traction (2, with the observation that Hare is political but not dogmatic repeated on pp. 5 and 13). “I believe Hare is as radical as it’s possible to be and still be heard on a regular basis in mainstream theaters,” Donesky writes (12). Hare’s Portable Theatre colleague Tony Bicat puts the resistant Hare’s popularity in more piquant terms:

He has spectacularly achieved the ambition of big political plays on major stages. I remember sitting in the expensive stalls at the National Theatre at the first night of *The Secret Rapture* and watching the well-heeled audience around me laughing

at a play that was basically about what a bunch of shits they were. How is this magic achieved? I wondered (Bicat 27).

In 1978 Hare spoke about his motivation to write on politics, and acknowledged a degree of anti-political prejudice at the time:

That sense that the greater part of the culture is simply looking at the wrong things. I became a writer by default, to fill in the gaps, to work on the areas of the fresco which were simply ignored, or appropriated for the shallowest purpose: rock music, black propaganda, gun-selling, diplomacy . . . In common with other writers who look with their own eyes, I have been abused in the newspapers for being hysterical, strident and obscene, when all I was doing was observing the passing scene, its stridency, its hysteria, its obscenity, and trying to put it in a historical context which the literary community seems pathologically incapable of contemplating (Hare *Writing Left-Handed* 34).

Hare's critics include those who simply resist his project (vocal among them have been the flamboyant provocateur Martin McDonagh and Mark Ravenhill, as noted by Les Wade) and those who misread the relationship between fact and fiction in Hare's oeuvre. Chris Megson and Dan Rebellato's "'Theatre and Anti-Theatre': David Hare and Public Speaking" makes the intriguing but unpersuasive argument that in his drive for the primacy of content, Hare is intuitively anti-theatrical, as evidenced by his affinity for the lecture. They conclude that because Hare distrusts *politicians* as actors, that he therefore distrusts *acting*. (Arthur Miller also distrusted politicians as performers: see his short

book *On Politics and the Art of Acting*, drawn from his March 2001 lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities.) Megson's and Rebellato's chief evidence is *Via Dolorosa*. They quote Hare explaining why he chose the format he did – that the “pretend” form of theater would not measure up to the dire facts and harrowing experiences he uncovered – and conclude that it reveals “a profound anti-theatricality” that “for the most part, continued to organize his dramaturgy ever since” (Megson 243). On Hare's verbal style: “It is hard to think of any uses of language in Hare's work that draw attention to themselves as language. His work is consistently characterizable by its appearance of transparency” (246). The essay, which would seem to be supported by the documentary *The Permanent Way*, semi-supported by the reported/invented *Stuff Happens*, and refuted by the well-made *The Vertical Hour*, concludes that the exemplary Hare moment may be the opening of *Racing Demon*, which is a prayer (248). (The prayer is a seldom-used gesture for Hare that, if granted the significance Megson and Rebellato seek, would make the largely sectarian Hare much closer to the intensely religiously aware Kushner, whose prayers are simultaneously holy and public in *Angels* and “A Prayer for New York.”)

Yet it seems as persuasive to suggest that an embrace of lectures and prayers, far from renouncing stage fiction and theatricality, expand the linguistic and rhetorical tools of the playwright. They are the natural platforms for dramatists engaged with the public square and whose characters occupy public spheres; see, as a recent instance, the troubling sermons in John Patrick Shanley's widely staged, successfully filmed *Doubt*. Hare's language, which Megson and Rebellato find unpoeticized, is in fact highly charged with the linguistics of policy and process. Even the fiction/fictionalized projects

rely on the kind of fluency with process that is so deeply proscribed by the habitus/horizon of expectations on U.S. stages that in the first decade of the 21st century it was possible to see its strangulating effect on such titans as Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard and David Mamet.

American Shenanigans

The positive habitus promotes a fluency, a theatrical language, that American playwrights struggle to achieve; they do not possess as a birthright the license/visa or the habitus of a sustained, refined political gaze. Strikingly, however, the works of even major dramatists seldom graduate beyond satire or the juvenilia category that Hare rapidly outpaced. Shepard, routinely lauded as among the most intensively “American” dramatists of a playwriting generation that includes Edward Albee and David Mamet, is exemplary in this regard. The deep, poetic redolence of Shepard’s western settings, the nostalgia that many characters express for lost traditions and lost land, the recurring motifs of food and hunger (a sense of former plenty in the land), and the spectacularly eruptive, profoundly haunted familial splits that are routinely read as mythic and thus nationally archetypal all contribute to an outsized reputation as a writer in touch with American discontent. Shepard’s stage output, like Hare’s, began in the 1960s and grew steadily through the 1970s, climaxing in 1986 with *A Lie of the Mind*, a play that controversially featured a character literally wrapped in the American flag. Yet Leslie Wade, in *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* (1997), presses Shepard’s oeuvre to its limits in search of palpable political engagement, only to come up with a reading that she

acknowledges would likely dismay the playwright: that at the pinnacle of his fame in the 1980s, the values in Shepard's plays squared with those advanced by conservative president Ronald Reagan.

Wade's study portrays Shepard as notable for delineating the "American character"; she cites Tocqueville (3) as she makes claims for the plays' "evocation of the nation" (5). Wade writes, "Shepard's deployment of Western motifs, even as he reconstitutes its iconography, consequently links the playwright with a deep-rooted notion of American-ness and imbues his work with a resonance that echoes long-held notions of the American character" (63); "The nationalistic evocation of these plays thus invite speculation regarding the playwright's vision of America. What are the constituents of this conception? How, for Shepard, do mythologies of the past bear upon the politics of the present?" (68); "That his regionalism in some manner recovers a traditional understanding of America (and its conception of belonging) invites both scrutiny and evaluation. Like Whitman before him, Shepard sings of himself – why is his heard as an American tune?" (90); and:

Though there is nothing of the sociologist in Shepard, and while his domestic plays never undertake any Shavian polemic, a sense of timelessness issues from these works. Notwithstanding his comment that the American social scene 'totally bores him,' the images and emotions generated by his idiosyncratic domestic dramas struck a deep chord in theatre audiences and tapped the profound disquietude afflicting the country in the later years of the 1970s (95).

Curse of the Starving Class (1978), *Buried Child*, and *True West* (1980) – family dramas generally viewed as loosely linked, and often grouped with *Fool For Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) – are labeled by Wade as “dramas of decline” (96), a characterization that is broadly accurate but that does not sustain significant political insight or nuance. The overall Shepard project even begins to sound nostalgic, freighted as it is with longing for a mythic past; “Consistent in Shepard’s work is the presence of a misdirected American culture,” Wade observes (110), noting that Bonnie Marranca, John Lahr (naming the “romance for the land” 111) and other critics comment on the sentimentalism of Shepard’s instinct to give voice to a vague but pure American dream that now seems lost.

The enigmatic *Buried Child* (the 1978 Pulitzer winner that was revised and revived at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre in 1995, transferring to Broadway in 1996) has been a particular locus of “nation-evoking” analysis, thanks to the decrepit patriarch Dodge’s trucker’s cap and blanket (viewed symbolically as a monarch’s crown and cape) and the much-discussed former cornucopia of the back yard. Yet it is as persuasively read as Harold Pinter’s debauched *The Homecoming* (the return of a prodigal son with a new wife who is quickly preyed upon sexually by the family is a shared plot) by way of *Tobacco Road*. *A Lie of the Mind*, at four hours Shepard’s longest play, marks the capstone of Shepard’s popularity; the playwright’s stage output dwindled through the 1990s and into the new century. Longtime *Village Voice* theater critic Michael Feingold, reviewing the play’s 2010 off-Broadway revival, wrote that in 1985 *Lie* “seemed to me less a Sam Shepard play than a Sam Shepard compendium, ingesting all the themes of his prior plays into one big clearance sale, as a way of saying goodbye to the theater. The

works that followed it, though not without their individual charms, felt like postcards from elsewhere” (Feingold).

But even the conspicuous third act use of the U.S. flag in *Lie of the Mind* has not provoked a significant body of criticism exploring meaningful political themes in the drama, which limns a domestic breakup between a brutal man and the wife he has beaten, charting a slow, painful reconciliation that is given tortured voice with the severely injured woman’s strangulated, heavily psychologically burdened cry, “HEEZ MY HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAART!!!” (*Lie* act 1 scene 4). Even Shepard retrospectively judged the work as ungainly, telling the *New York Times* in a 2010 interview, “I’ve come to see it as a bit of an awkward play. If you were to talk about it in terms of cars, it’s like an old, broken-down Buick that you kind of hold together to just get down the road. All of the characters are in a fractured place, broken into pieces, and the pieces don’t really fit together. So it feels kind of rickety to me now” (Healey). Wade writes of the play’s “softening of the strident male outlook,” suggesting that it “evokes a sweeping view of the American landscape and a hopeful expression of American cohesion” (Wade 129), while in *Sam Shepard: A “Poetic Rodeo,”* Carol Rosen takes an aggressive, positive feminist view by applying Helene Cixous’s pivotal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” and its theoretical imperative to “write the body” (Rosen 165). “More than anything else, *A Lie of the Mind* depicts the journey from male to female consciousness,” Rosen asserts (169). Rosen acquires affirmation from Shepard in her 1993 interview: “In *A Lie of the Mind* and in *Far North* [Shepard’s 1988 film] you explore the female side of character, even in the men,” she says; Shepard responds, “I felt that too” (Rosen 226). Inarguably there are politics in what Rosen identifies throughout Shepard’s works as the “Relentless

mockery of men and their fetishes: their games of war, their medals, their guns, their prey, their trophies, their spoils, their domestic tyrannies” (Rosen 170). But the political content is often just barely implied, deeply imprecise, disconnected (willfully? naively?) from specific histories, as even Wade acknowledges: “Shepard’s fast and loose play with history reveals that his understanding of the cowboy, like that of the movie industry, has derived more from myth than fact” (Wade 118).

The social vacuum around Shepard’s settings and characters becomes problematic when the playwright turns his gaze to the immediate political scene, as he does with *States of Shock: A Vaudeville Nightmare* (1991) and *The God of Hell* (2004). *States of Shock*, a full-length one-act with no scene breaks, was written in direct response to the first Gulf War, and the subtitle is an accurate description of its furious, hyper-real style. The story revolves around another in a string of loud, abusive Shepard patriarchs, in this case a nameless colonel (played in the original 1991 off-Broadway production by John Malkovich) whom Shepard derisively over-costumes in a vainglorious motley of military regalia, layering the character in uniforms from World War II back through the Civil War (represented by a saber). The figure of the returning son is the appositely named Stubbs, the maimed veteran who was shot through the chest with a missile; in what will become a refrain, Stubbs laments his post-war disability, yelling, “MY THING HANGS LIKE DEAD MEAT!!!” The Colonel wants Stubbs to relate the heroic narrative of how the Colonel’s son was killed by the same artillery that wounded Stubbs, but Stubbs, dragged to a diner by the Colonel (who promises Stubbs a dessert), declines to illustrate the battle with the toy soldiers the Colonel provides. In the presence of White Man and White Woman – bleached, ineffectual characters waiting, like so many Shepard figures, for food

that does not come (their waitress is a black woman named Glory Bee) – Stubbs instead tells an ignoble tale that strongly suggests that his injury resulted from friendly fire, and that Stubbs himself is actually the Colonel’s son. Shepard provides support for this assertion: the colonel talks of nursing Stubbs, presumably after the injury, but with overtones of parenting: “All that time in the hospital . . . All that long time when I nursed you. Changed your shitty sheets. Cleaned your fingernails? Emptied your bladder bag.” Stubbs, essentially a buried child, replies: “I remember the moment you forsook me. The moment you gave me up . . . The moment you invented my death . . . When you threw me away,” to which the Colonel, slamming the table, retorts, “I NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER!!!!”

The short play is largely characterized by the Colonel’s apoplectic outbursts and Stubbs’s trance monologues, one of which features a typically provocative Shepard line: “America had disappeared.” A turning point is reached when the Colonel says, “Have to learn to pay for your actions. Become a man,” and the response from Stubbs over his next four lines are increasingly insurgent: “Become a man” rising to “BECOME A MAN!” Stubbs eventually re-enacts the battle, staggering around on the back of Glory Bee; he repeats the earlier “you invented my death” charge. At the play’s end Stubbs rants about patriarchy-driven bloodbaths, referencing Abraham and Judas and indicting the Colonel, who responds with a monologue blurring geographical and psychological isolation to suggest American impregnability; Stubbs’s response is to take the sabre, and the stage direction reads, “He raises the sword in one quick and decisive movement, as though to decapitate the colonel, and freezes in that posture.” The show closes with a tune from the

American songbook as the White Man is joined a verse at a time by Glory Bee, then White Woman, then the Colonel, all singing “Good Night, Irene.”

This “vaudeville” dramatizes Shepard’s political rage, an undisguised fury that forecloses intellectual exploration and reduces the stage representation of politics and characters to the broadest, harshest mode of caricature. In his 1993 interview with Rosen, the cool Shepard’s temperature rose as he explained the genesis of the play, a reaction, he said, against the triumphalism of bombing defenseless people:

That there was this punitive attitude – we’re just going to knock these people off the face of the earth. And then it’s devastating. Not only that, but they’ve convinced the American public that this was a good deed, that this was in fact a heroic fucking war, and welcome the heroes back. What fucking heroes, man? I mean, they bombed the shit out of these people. They knocked the stew out of them over there with bombing and bombing and bombing. The notion of this being a heroic event is outrageous (Rosen 235).

The God of Hell is partly informed by Shepard’s interest in dramatizing trauma, already explored in *A Lie of the Mind* and, immediately preceding *Shock*, in the 1991 revision of *The War in Heaven* with Joseph Chaikin. It also evokes the helter-skelter protest theater of the 1960s; David J. DeRose calls it

An anti-war play written by a member of the Viet Nam generation from the cultural perspective of the Viet Nam war era. The style and politics of the play – rather than an unintentional regression on Shepard’s part – seem quite consciously reminiscent of the drama of the Viet Nam era, as if to ask the obvious question that the media during the Gulf War either refused to ask or was not allowed to ask: namely, doesn’t anybody here remember Viet Nam? Didn’t we learn anything twenty years ago? (DeRose).

DeRose does not develop a comparison between the two wars; the 1960s dramaturgical lineage he champions, however, was clearly received, acknowledged in the opening sentence of Frank Rich's *New York Times* review:

Sam Shepard has been away from the New York theater for only six years – since the epic *Lie of the Mind* – but *States of Shock*, his new play at the American Place, could lead you to believe he has been hibernating since his East Village emergence in the Vietnam era. *States of Shock* is in its own elliptical way an antiwar play, written with the earnest – one might even say quaint – conviction that the stage is still an effective platform for political dissent and mobilizing public opinion (Rich “Sam Shepard Returns”).

Just over a decade later, Shepard's political anger again translated into broad slapstick with the more apparently farcical *The God of Hell*, responding to what he perceived to be post-9/11 excesses in anti-terrorism/Homeland Security/Patriot Act practices. Like *Shock*, the play again infantilizes characters that register as cripplingly inarticulate and politically ignorant. The dialogue moves at what is, for Shepard, a notably brisk pace, eschewing long speeches and trance monologues in favor of short, crisp exchanges at a comic tempo. (It is comparatively short, running 90 minutes, and is divided into three scenes.) As with *Shock*, the *dramatis personae* include a mid-American couple of disturbingly limited vision; Frank and Emma are Wisconsin dairy farmers hiding Haynes, an old acquaintance of Frank's, in their basement (from exactly what threat Haynes is hiding they do not know). Also as with *Shock*, the play's antagonist is an

apoplectic, abusive emblem of American power; Welch, whose name suggests he has doubled back on some sort of bargain, is hunting Haynes, though in Welch's first appearance he drolly tempts Emma with a flag-shaped cookie trimmed with red, white and blue frosting (scene 1) and shames Emma for her home's lack of conspicuous patriotic display.³⁴ Like the Colonel in *Shock*, Welch believes he can seduce his infantilized victim/martyr with desserts; to the apprehended Haynes – who, like Stubbs, is disabled at the root, humiliatingly emasculated, tethered by the penis with electrical cables, and who, like Stubbs, is guilty only of secretly witnessing official misconduct – he promises the sweets and diversions Haynes whimperingly requests: Krispy Kremes, Mallomars and comic books (74, just before the scene two conclusion of Welch hanging up a string of flags in Emma's kitchen). Like *Lie*, the play displays the American flag, only this time without ambiguity as Shepard plainly mocks the post-9/11, Patriot Act mentality that brandishes flags everywhere from highway overpasses to suit lapels. The intimidating Welch pulls out flags repeatedly during the hunt for his fugitive, and they flourish within the household as a sign of Welch's takeover as initially he offers Emma flags (scene 1) and eventually, without seeking permission, staple-guns them to the cupboards (scene 2).

Shepard depicts Welch as retrograde American: Welch explains to Emma, "I was traveling from east to west before, but now I'm reversing. Like Lewis and Clark" (scene 1). Government is glancingly implicated in the hard times of these dairy farmers through Emma's statements "But it's all moved away . . . Out west. Agribusiness. Big corporations" (scene 1) and "Nobody farms anymore. Government pays them not to. We're the only ones left" (scene 2). But Frank and Emma – private citizens, yet also,

inescapably, the public – are implicated, as well, for their isolationism and political naivete. The apparently dumb repetition of the word “heifer” positions Frank as not bucolically or innocently unassuming but as woefully or even dangerously simple, and both characters plead guilty to social ignorance. When Welch badgers Emma about her household’s lack of patriotic American display, any markers of heritage to project to the rest of the world, she replies, “I don’t know about the rest of the world.” Frank remarks, “When I’m feeding the heifers, time stands still for me. Nothing else exists” (scene 1), and when Frank says to Emma of Welch, “He’s from the government!” the ensuing repetition of “government” depicts the characters as political gulls, citizen fish suddenly flopping out of water:

EMMA. What government?

FRANK. Our government . . . I don’t know what our government is anymore. Do you? What does that mean, ‘our government’? (scene 3).

As Welch intrudes and conquers, they wonder:

EMMA. Frank – how did this happen? How could this be happening to us? We were living so –

FRANK. We weren’t paying attention, Emma. We let things slip right past us (scene 3).

The plot’s unusual (for Shepard) topicality includes references to plutonium leaks in “Rocky Buttes,” a light veiling of Rocky Flats in Colorado, site of radioactive waste

leakage (scene 2). This leakage is somehow the source of Haynes's alarming electrification – he emits sparks from his hands (scene 1) and even from his crotch (scene 2) – along with the sessions of torture that are obliquely referred to in the opening dialogue between Frank and Emma. When the captured, tortured Haynes appears barefooted, wearing a T-shirt and khaki pants, with a black hood over his head (scene 3), the unmistakable reference – and in fact, Shepard's motivation for writing the play – is to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. (The Abu Ghraib incident, with American soldiers abusing prisoners in Baghdad, became public in the spring of 2004, and Shepard wrote the play over the summer and hurriedly produced it in New York in the fall to have it on view before the general election [McKinley].) Yet the one-dimensional depiction of power, so typical of comic satires but dramaturgically problematic dating back to the politically driven workers' theaters of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, flattens and demonizes its villain, exaggerating Welch to the absurd scale of evil cartoon send-ups in James Bond films or the sarcastic cable TV cartoon *South Park*. The power-mongering Welch is described as amorally disposed toward facts (Emma: "He didn't seem the least bit interested in that." Haynes: "In what?" Emma: "The truth" [scene 2]), and the cliché of jaunty arrogance in an apparently invulnerable, power-mad villain is activated in a Welch speech to Haynes: "We can do whatever we want, buddy-boy. That should be clear by now. We're in the driver's seat. Haven't you noticed? There's no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape . . . We're in absolute command now" (scene 2).

Playwright Mac Wellman and critic Toby Zinman are among those who responded positively to Shepard's play of surfaces from the 1960s through the 1980s, a

disengagement from strict realism and plausible psychology that was marked by spectacular physical eruptions and lengthy interior speeches. Zinman theorizes what she labeled Shepard's "super-realism," the trance monologues and the violent verbal and physical outbursts that made Shepard the exemplar of an American style of writing and acting for a generation.³⁵ She compares Shepard's writing to certain two-dimensional paintings featuring bold, shimmery surfaces, suggesting that the plays likewise have an "aggressive frontality": "This creates a dynamic on stage which is essentially one of performance rather than of fourth-wall realism" (Zinman 424). Developing the idea of "reflective surfaces," Zinman writes, "That sense of layers, of something underneath, obscured yet crucial, is basic to the very technique of super-realism"; the consequence for the acting style is "It does not ask us to believe that this is real life, but rather that this is real performance . . . The admiration is for performance, for dazzling exaggeration through technique" (Zinman 425-6).³⁶ Wellman, like Zinman writing from a 1980s pre-*Angels/Absence/Fires in the Mirror* perspective, asserted, "The odd thing about playwriting in this country is how over time the fervent attempt to capture Real Life has led to a radically impoverished dramatic vocabulary" (Wellman 61). His essay, "The Theatre of Good Intentions," champions Shepard as a promising non-realistic model because his characters are not "Euclidean," meaning mechanically/artificially rounded, with all aspects of personality tidily connected to a central theme. To Wellman's delight, Shepard's characters display a gift for simply spewing what comes into their heads, and Wellman appreciates the psychological unpredictability, the apparent spontaneity and lack of discernible conscious playwriting connivance.

With *States of Shock* and *The God of Hell*, however, Shepard's unaccustomed focus on specific political power, rather than on mythic domestic/intra-familial struggle, provides the characters and their situations with a more palpable connection to the real world, and the close proximity of measurable reality reveals a disturbingly unsophisticated stage language and an oversimplified dramatization of policy, politicians, and events. Unaccustomed to realism and unpracticed at dramatizing history, the playwright lampoons. In a 2004 interview with Don Shewey, Shepard commented:

The sides are being divided now. It's very obvious. So if you're on the other side of the fence, you're suddenly anti-American. It's breeding fear of being on the wrong side. Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy, is it? It's something else. It may be an inch away from totalitarianism . . . We're being sold a brand-new idea of patriotism (Shewey "Patriot").

The God of Hell, which Shepard labeled bluntly as "a takeoff on Republican fascism" (McKinley), concludes with Emma ringing a bell as a call to action, signaling the play as a public alert. This "call to action" ending is not uncommon; see Prior Walter's benediction in *Angels in America*: "The disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come" (*Perestroika* epilogue); note also the exhortatory closing statements/gestures of Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* and

Wilson's *Radio Golf*. Yet Shepard has never fully embraced either the practice or the public role of playwright, certainly not as a commentator on social matters *a la* Miller, Hellman, Kushner. The reticence was evident as Shepard told Shewey, "I don't want to become a spokesman for a point of view. I really want the play to speak for itself." Both plays speak loudly, as violent, bumptious comic screeds.

In his interview with Oliva, Hare said of Shepard, "Sam doesn't have any politics, or rather his politics are so bovine and stupid . . . He is infuriating. And the lack of an admission that politics is in our lives is what cripples Sam's work . . . A writer who doesn't admit that in my view is just stupid. It makes his work childish and not grown up." In the previous breath Hare had praised Mamet as a political writer "in English eyes":

He will deny it . . . He says, 'If I were British I'd be a political writer. But I'm American so I can't be.' However, there is a political dimension to David's work, with an analysis of capitalism. There is a view about what keeps capitalism going, what attitudes keep capitalism going, and he is political. He is in that sense a fifty times richer writer than Sam Shepard (Oliva 180).

Mamet, unlike Shepard, has latterly embraced the mantle of public playwright, unsheathing a polemical sword and clattering it loudly in *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture* (2011), a non-fiction book critiquing liberalism and explaining his recent embrace of conservatism. Mamet's fanshen, to use the Chinese term for a revolutionary political turn (and to invoke the title of Hare's 1975 play), was first described in his 2008 *Village Voice* essay "Why I Am No Longer a 'Brain-Dead'

Liberal,” which chronicles his gradual reversal and asserts, “A free-market understanding of the world meshes more perfectly with my experience than that idealistic vision I called liberalism” (Mamet “Why”). The book reverts to Mamet’s dramaturgical type, proclaiming political generalities in precise sentences but seldom citing specific incidents or names, though eventually he does take direct aim at President Obama, and at such time-tested right-wing targets as Jane Fonda and Gloria Steinem. Cases are described in two sentences or so; chapters are terse. Mamet’s drumbeat is for the workings of the free market, against government and regulation (his antagonists), though his arguments are prone to melodramatic dichotomies: maturity vs. immaturity, independence and enterprise vs. dependence and ignorance. Ignorance is equated with obliviousness of How the World Works, to use Mametian emphasis. In brief, life is comprised of encounters with other individuals who are necessarily in survival mode, and thus the savvy individual learns to fend for himself. Mamet writes much on Israel, and the presumed liberal disdain thereof. A scriptural-homiletic cadence is dominant: “Kindness is good. No doubt. What, however, is kindness?” (24). He frequently invokes Torah and the Talmud, writing, “The rabbis tell us”; he also invokes the Bible, arguing that these cornerstones of morality are based not on compassion (the liberal Achilles heel), but on law. It is striking, and it seems to be unparalleled, to have so much political philosophy proffered by a major contemporary American playwright – not even Kushner has ventured a book-length, purely political tract – and *The Secret Knowledge* has repositioned Mamet in American culture, drawing attention from publications and/or sections normally disinterested in dramatists or theater books (*The Daily Beast*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The American Conservative*).

Confutatio is practically non-existent, however, as Mamet skirts standard arguments to conservative positions. The 2008 economic crash, for instance, yields no real discussion of financial and banking regulation, but instead parrots the conservative line attacking the “liberal” policy of pushing home ownership upon unqualified buyers. Regarding “predatory” lending, the author of cutthroat double-cross dramas *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Speed-the-Plow* and the screenwriter-director of the con artist films *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Heist* asks rhetorically whether there is any other kind (119). *The Secret Knowledge* consistently portrays human nature as venal and government as an entity that will, by its cancerous nature, engulf and expand, whereas individuals can work out their differences in open markets:

Will there be abuses? Of course. But our free enterprise system, and the free market in ideas brings more prosperity and happiness to the greatest numbers of people in history. It is the envy of the world. This envy often takes the form of hatred. But examine our local haters of democracy, and of capitalism, the American Left and their foreign comrades come a-visiting to tell us of our faults. They are here not because we are the Great Satan, but because here they are free to speak. And you will note that when they write they copyright their books, and buy goods with the proceeds (27).

The declarations in *The Secret Knowledge* have a court jester’s crisp, cynical punch, and often they seem designed less to persuade than to provoke:

As a youth I enjoyed – indeed, like most of my contemporaries, revered – the agitprop plays of Brecht, and his indictments of Capitalism. It later occurred to me that his plays were copyrighted, and that he, like I, was living through the operations of that same free market. His protestations were not borne out by his actions, neither *could* they be. Why, then, did he profess Communism? Because it sold (2).

On dramaturgy and character:

When I was young, there was a period in American drama in which the writers strove to free themselves of the question of *character*.

Protagonists of their worthy plays had made no choices, but were *afflicted* by a condition not of their making; and this condition, homosexuality, illness, being a woman, etc., was the center of the play. As these protagonists had made no choices, they were in a state of innocence. They had not acted, so they could not have sinned.

A play is basically an exercise in the raising, lowering, and altering of expectations (such known, collectively, as the Plot); but these plays dealt not with expectations (how could they, for the state of the protagonist was not going to change?) but with *sympathy*.

What these audiences were witnessing was not a *drama*, but a troublesome human condition displayed as an attraction. This was, formerly, known as a freak show (134).

Mamet's use of italics and capitals conveys not merely emphasis, but derision (“*sympathy*”) and irony (“Plot,” “*drama*”). It is a schoolyard language, with ridicule and asserted superiority as forceful rhetorical tools. His voice is not discursive, but dismissive, and while Mamet's blunt jabs back at his erstwhile fellow travellers was embraced in (among other media) a radio interview with Rush Limbaugh (Limbaugh), they were efficiently refuted by the equally pugnacious iconoclast Christopher Hitchens. “This is an extraordinarily irritating book,” wrote the veteran geopolitical journalist Hitchens, upon whose native turf Mamet had strayed. Hitchens's *New York Times* review cited Mamet's “unqualified declarations” and “commitment to the one-dimensional or the flat-out partisan,” noting that he “fails to compare like with like” (the association of the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico with the release of classified information via Wikileaks, for example). Hitchens charged that the playwright “shows himself tone-deaf to irony and unable to render a fair picture of what his opponents (and, sometimes, his preferred authorities, like [economist Friedrich von] Hayek) really believe,” and of Mamet's assertion that the Israelis want to live in peace and the Arabs want “to kill them all,” Hitchens responded, “Whatever one's opinion of that conflict may be, this (twice-made) claim of his abolishes any need to analyze or even discuss it. It has a long way to go before it can even be called simplistic” (Hitchens).

Mamet seemed to embrace the court jester role in a short deadpan interview with the *New York Times Magazine*, replying to a question about *Secret Knowledge*, “Of course I'm alienating the public! That's what they pay me for” (Goldman). Plainly *The Secret Knowledge* is meant as a serious book, but Mamet's recent political stage works, like Shepard's, conform to an American habitus in fitting the jester mold; they are

shenanigan plays. Rejecting government for free markets and displaying a disdain for debate, Mamet has no theatrical language/dramatic form available other than that of the high-energy farce, larded with caricature, punch lines and hijinks. Like Shepard, Mamet has penned two plays involving nation/government post-*Angels/Absence of War/Fires in the Mirror: Romance* (2005), a courtroom farce set against the backdrop of Middle East peace talks, and *November* (2008), which satirizes an amoral American president and the (turkey) sausage-making process of holding power. In *Romance*, which is divided into four scenes, the case being tried is vague because the exact dispute does not matter. We learn early that the Defendant (nearly all the play's figures are nameless) is a chiropractor, but not until the final moments do we learn what he is charged with (striking a chiropodist). The legal proceeding is derailed over and over by crude self-interest and petty enmity inflamed by all manner of difference (ethnic, sexual, temperamental, etc.). The genuine conflict begins in the second scene, when the nameless Jewish Defendant asks his Christian Defense Attorney, as part of the defense strategy, to lie in court. Tempers flare, and religiously-driven antagonism explodes:

DEFENDANT. I'm paying you . . .

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. . . . a *pittance*. For what I go through? Forced to sit *next* to you, you SICK FUCK, day-after-day, supporting you, nodding at your infantile hypocrisies. This sick, Talmudic, Jewish . . . (*Pause.*) Ohmigod.

DEFENDANT. Aha (scene 2).

A familiar American ritual of deep contrition (recently dubbed in political circles as “walking back” the remarks) follows, and the Attorney's apology is apparently accepted

until the Defendant, in a shocking punch line (“You might have trouble, getting the Priest’s dick out of your son’s ass”), slurs the Attorney’s church, at which point the gloves come off fully (“You fucken kike” as an opener from the Attorney). Yet by the end of the scene Mamet gives the Defendant an epiphany as the character explains his chiropractic work: “I KNOW HOW TO BRING PEACE TO THE MIDDLE EAST!!!” His “happy idea” is as improbable as those motivating Greek Old Comedy, that by healthfully “cricking” the necks of the Israelis and Palestinians, peace may reign. But the Defendant and the Attorney never get to present their plan in court due to the Marx Brothers anarchy that Mamet unleashes to derail sense within the courtroom. Obstacles include a romantic dispute between the Prosecutor and his lover Bernard (first spotted in a leopard print thong), who ultimately charges into the court and presents evidence about romantic infidelities that involve the Defendant. Another impediment is the pill-popping Judge (perilously close to being a stage drunk) with no capacity to focus. Punch lines of official incompetence drive the long final scene, which recalls the brisk tempo and giddy misrule of George S. Kaufman. Like Shepard, Mamet portrays his most authoritative figure as a farcical travesty:

JUDGE. I said, “I can send ‘em to Jail . . .?” “You bet your ass.” “Mickey,” I said, “for *what?*” “Anything, Dan. Anything, or nothing.” First time did it feel funny? *Sure*. Like anything. You get used to it. Like sex. You get married. “I can get it anytime.” Weeks pass, you realize: there have to be *rules*. A pattern, perhaps, give-and-take. Sometimes she’s tired, the things, what are they called . . . ?

PROSECUTOR. “Precedents?” (*phone rings*)

JUDGE. *Vibrators*. They aren't called *precedents*. Huh? Are you *fucking* with me? (scene 4).

The theme of incompetent/corrupted power is amplified a moment later as the Judge declares, "I don't need a reason; all's I need's, this little hammer here . . . N'I'm gone use it till the *batteries* run out." The use of racial/national/ethnic difference is deliberately incendiary and depicted in vaudeville terms that verge on minstrelsy; the Judge, rambling, says, "White Race unsuited, yes, to labor in that Equatorial Heat," confesses that he is Jewish but then expresses relief when told he is mistaken, and says, "Do you know, I once had an affair, with the Only Ugly Girl in Iceland . . .? (*pause*) Now, you say how ugly was she . . .?" (*pause*) ALL: "How ugly was she . . .?" The mention of Islam is greeted with trepidation by the entire *dramatis personae*:

JUDGE. (*now stripped down to his undershirt*): Whoa, whoa, whoa, then, let's be Very Careful what we say about them . . . [these lines are spoken amid choral consensus] With the "things" . . . around their head . . . Those fine, fine people . . . I'd hate to tick them off . . . And I'm not just saying that because they have all the oil . . . Or because they sometimes, uh, uh, uh, uh, they sometimes . . .

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. . . . Everybody needs to "blow off steam" (scene 4).

The name-calling play successfully upends decorum and skewers pieties but comes no closer to investigating politics than when the Judge waxes about the incompatibility of lions and lambs:

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. But for the moment, in these fleeting moments, the representatives of two great and warring powers . . .

JUDGE. Do you believe those sheenies and those . . . uh, uh . . .

BAILIFF. . . . Fine, upstanding Arabs . . .

ALL. Mmm.

JUDGE. . . . can ever stop their stupid bitching?

The answer is contained within the play's action, for Mamet, as he makes abundantly clear throughout nearly three decades of interviews collected in Leslie Kane's *David Mamet In Conversation*, considers himself to be a strict Aristotelian in privileging plot above all else in the drama.³⁷ The Defendant never gets to the peace conference to adjust and correct the spines of the participants, and the ending makes clear that the play is a facsimile of that conference, which breaks down along exactly the same lines as the trial:

BERNARD. Did you hear what one fellow called the other fellow at the Peace Conference?

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. The leaders have quitted the Peace Conference. They have departed in wrath.

DEFENDANT. Too late, too late . . . why, Lord, oh why are we doomed to endless strife?

DEFENSE ATTORNEY. Well, everything was going fine till you killed Christ (scene 4).

It is worth noting that John Patrick Shanley cast his gaze at the Middle East and similarly resorted to low comedy in *Dirty Story* (2003), a satiric allegory that featured the U.S. as a cowboy, Britain as an impotent figure constantly being derided and belittled by the swaggering U.S., with Israel (named Wanda, until the first act curtain line when she announces, “Call. Me. Israel”) and Palestine (a male named Brutus) as a couple perpetually bickering about being forced to share the same apartment.

In form and spirit *Romance* suggests Aristophanes, and the swift three act *November* closely follows suit. The plot involves another “happy idea”: a President, much-despised – “Why have they turned against me?” President Smith asks, and his chief of staff answers, “Because you’ve fucked up everything you’ve touched” (act 1) – looks for ways to raise campaign cash via backroom (read: Oval Office) efforts. Eventually this president tries to squeeze more money from the turkey lobby on the occasion of the traditional pardoning of the Thanksgiving birds, suggesting by way of extortion that perhaps the Pilgrims actually ate fish, and that the contemporary electorate, properly encouraged, might follow suit, with calamitous economic consequences for the turkey industry. The disputants include Bernstein, the president’s lesbian speechwriter, who has just returned from China to adopt a baby girl with her partner; the sniffing Bernstein has also brought back a bird flu that will kill the turkeys the president was meant to pardon. Also bedeviling the president is the much-offended leader of the Micmac tribe, who is addressed/attacked in unbridled racist language; the dialogue in *November* is as deliberately risible as that in *Romance*, with the combustible President Charles Smith routinely resorting to street epithets as he insults and threatens his enemies, which means practically everyone. The play’s ethos, driven by Smith, neither doubts nor disputes that

money will salvage the disgraced president's re-election efforts, as articulated by the desperate incumbent: "Nobody's spending any money on me. That's the problem, Archie. They dint cut me off, I'd be beating the other guy into Marshmallow Fluff. All I need, I need, some money . . ." (act 1). The president almost puts this in a high-minded way, the gravity of his delivery made clear (and the punch line deftly set up) by Mamet's ever-precise handling of punctuation: "I would hate to think. That the people were deprived of a choice. Because one side . . . simply ran out of cash" (act 1). "That's the American way," replies Archer, Smith's apparent chief of staff (Mamet puckishly identifies both Smith and Archer only as "a man in a suit," and the setting as "an office"). Later, still casting after a profitable scheme, Smith asks, "Who can we shake down?" (act 1), and that is the comedy's refrain. *November* is a dramatization of a marketplace that is mischievous but effective, because it is uproariously free – free, as illustrated through the unapologetically out-of-bounds speeches and actions of Smith, to insult, intimidate, badger and plead, all of which Mamet classifies as "negotiations." "Pretty funny play," Mamet wrote in *The Secret Knowledge*. "And its theme, I believe, is not only that we are 'all human,' but, better, that we are all Americans . . . I considered the play a love letter to America" (6).

Even so, Mamet cannot (or, quite likely, does not wish to) avoid the trope of the corrupt official; his President Smith is as unrepentantly ignoble and self-interested as a Groucho Marx or Bob Hope character. Bernstein, the savvy speechwriter (and a noble liberal whose gift for high inspirational rhetoric is amply displayed), paid \$25,000 to the Chinese during her adoption process; Smith seizes on this to implicitly indict her for, in her words, "Trafficking in human flesh" (act 2). For Smith, this is leverage, and he

continually invokes the ethos of the horse-trade, as in this definitive exchange with Bernstein:

CHARLES. Ain't nobody in this room but us. All your fricken bullshit about "social justice." That's swell. What you *forgot*: THIS IS A DEMOCRACY.

Which *means*: The *people* make the laws. And if *you* want to make the laws, you *go* to the people who make the laws, and what do you do?

ARCHER. You bribe them.

CHARLES. YOU BRIBE THEM. You give them something *they'd* like. In order to get something *you'd* like. Just like you did in third grade.

ARCHER. That's right.

CHARLES. You say "gimme your candy bar and I'll give you my orange."

BERNSTEIN. I . . .

CHARLES. You do *not* say: "Give me your candy bar, because it exploits the cocoa workers in Brazil . . ."

ARCHER. *Chucky*.

CHARLES. I heard it on National Public Radio (act 2).

The *quid pro quo* thus firmly established as the *de facto* law of Smith's land, the president offers to pay Bernstein for the politically resuscitative speech he wants her to write. Her price is for the president to see to it that she and her partner can marry legally, immediately; complications ensue before a happy ending is reached.

November is an ebullient political play, and although its satirical form keeps it at a safe remove from the earnest engagement of Hare, *November*, *Romance*, *The Secret*

Knowledge and Mamet's 2012 drama *The Anarchist* – about a U.S. political prisoner whose sentence is nearly completed, and the state that may extend her period of incarceration – all position Mamet toward the “political” category that for much of his career he sought to resist. His strongest statements about the antipathy between drama and politics (with sideswipes at non-profit cultural production) are to be found in *Theatre*, source of the direct declaration that opened this study (“Should the theatre be political? Absolutely not”):

That a director is good at moving folks around the couch or a writer is skilled at snappy repartee does not qualify either to use the audience's time in preaching – indeed, a straight-up paying audience will (and should) not stand for such nonsense and will drive the pontificator into another line of work. Unless he is subsidized (65).

A play must not be a lecture, and anyone staging the thing in his garage will, self-schooled, learn this by checking the tin box at the close of the first weekend. (The school-bound, government-supported, or otherwise impaired are spared this lesson until the [unlikely] first contact with the actual world [the audience]) (73).

Earlier statements lean in the same anti-political direction, though they are sometimes tempered, with Kane's collection of interviews providing an invaluable source of Mamet's thinking across the years. Of *American Buffalo*, Mamet said, “We have to take responsibility. Theater is a place of recognition, it's an ethical exercise, it's where we show ethical interchange” (Kane 12); and “I certainly was writing about a society outside the law . . . It's about the same thing Nixon and all those people were doing. It's not that

much more sophisticated” (Kane 18). Asked, “Have you ever made any strong political statements in any of your writings?”, Mamet replied, “No, but neither did Hogarth . . . Seriously, the theater is a most useful political tool; it’s a place where we go to hear the truth” (33). In 1994 Mamet told *Playboy*, “My plays are not political. They’re dramatic. I don’t believe that the theater is a good venue for political argument. Not because it is wrong but because it doesn’t work very well” (Kane 124). (Mamet’s rhetorical contrast of “political” and “dramatic” is characteristically mischievous, but the tactic is also the kind of unbalanced comparison critiqued by Hitchens.) But as Shepard has been received as essentially, consequentially “American” because of the allusiveness of his Western settings and mytho-poetic language, so Mamet, as Hare observed, is read as having a political bedrock based on his consistent dramatization of commerce, even though the commercial world Mamet investigates is not that of the “legitimate” market. Whether his characters occupy shabby pawn shops or elegant Hollywood offices, Mamet’s dealers are shadowy con artists and hustlers who make their own rules, and while that may be effectively posited as a metaphor for “legitimate” practice, like the name-calling among Mamet’s generic disputants it can stand as no more than caricature. Though he is a champion of learning at first hand, through his own brief experience selling real estate and through longer association with masters of deception and cons, it is difficult to imagine Mamet studying actual financiers to frame a play, as Hare did with his metatheatrical *The Power of Yes* (2009) In 1994, Mamet said on *The South Bank Show*:

I think something is provocative because it is artistic, not because it is realistic, that is, issue plays, issue movies, which we leave by saying, ‘By God, now I understand!’ by the next morning we’ve forgotten them because it’s not real. As

soon as you put something on screen, it's an artistic experience, and to *correctly* fill an artistic experience it has to say something that, that [sic] is revelatory of an inner truth. That's something, that's something that we can apply to our daily life. The more something attempts to be documentary and realistic, the less useful it is (Kane 144-5, emphasis added; "correctly" underlines the lure, for Mamet, of dramaturgical dogma).

Mamet can stake such a claim because his stories, while intriguing, full of behavior that is "bad" and often amusing and/or revealing, rejects the challenge of trying to create a valent stage language for investigating and dramatizing immediate social/political matters. Unlike Hare and Kushner, Mamet sees no possibility in government, even while claiming to champion democracy. As Steven Spielberg's 2012 film *Lincoln* opened, Kushner, who wrote the screenplay, said, "An easy recourse to despair and contempt for the system was as active and virulent in the days of the Civil War as it is now . . . but if you believe in equality and justice and really, in a certain sense, in *government*, you have to keep working towards building a better society that our still-functioning democracy allows" (Hornaday, italics in original). Moreover, the contemporary American habitus that perpetuates a vast distance between playwrights and politics deprives Mamet of any workable models through which to craft a viable play of political rigor and inquiry; only satire is possible. Thus, like Shepard, he writes from a dismissive position that is effectively a position of surrender and helplessness; he dramatizes shenanigans.

By the century's turn even Arthur Miller was cornered by the habitus. Miller, dispirited by the increasingly dismissive American response to his work,³⁸ in 1991 chose to debut *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* not in New York but in the West End. "There's more of a theater culture (in London)," Miller told the press (Wolf). The British hospitality to even untested Miller suggests the oceanic gap in habitus and horizon of expectations, as does the reception to Miller's *Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (which opened at the Wyndham in October 1991, in the same London season with *Angels* (at the National's Cottesloe), Hare's *Murmuring Judges*, and in New York, *Fires in the Mirror*) and his next two plays. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* drew British audiences even with mixed notices (Christiansen); Bigsby writes of the reception to *The Last Yankee*, "It opened in America and Britain in 1993 to contrasting reviews. The London production, at the Young Vic, was celebrated; the American production was largely, though not wholly, dismissed. By now, this was no more than Miller expected" (Bigsby *Miller* 381). Bigsby repeats himself as the habitus was reified in 1994 with Miller's *Broken Glass*: "By now it scarcely came as a surprise that it was received with muted praise in his home country while winning the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Play in Britain" (Bigsby *Miller* 390). *Broken Glass* played to near-sellout houses at the National, where Miller's dominance has outshone even Hare's: "More productions of Miller's plays have been staged by the Royal National theatre than of any other playwright's, with the single exception of Shakespeare" (Bigsby *Miller* 417).

Even so, by 2002, Miller joined Mamet and Shepard in contributing yet another shenanigan play to the archive of major American dramatists writing politically in the first decade of the new millennium. *Resurrection Blues* is a furious curiosity, wildly

angry and grotesquely improbable, a satire that speaks to a futility not so much in the nation critiqued (the setting is unnamed, but, as Bruce Weber and others have noted, the target is plainly the U.S.), as in the writer. The play, organized into a prologue and six scenes, strikes a serious tone during the prologue as Jeanine, a young woman in a wheelchair, directly addresses the audience. The disappointed revolutionary Jeanine explains that she has just failed at suicide (she jumped out of a window), keying the audience to the play's mood of despair. Jeanine's prologue gives way to a slow-moving scene between Jeanine's father, Henri Schultz, and Henri's cousin, General Felix Barriaux. Henri is a successful international industrialist turned philosopher, which unfortunately compels Henri to speak throughout the play from an unruly position of pragmatism and idealism. Felix is chief of the unnamed militarized state – “We are a military government and I am only one of five officers running things” (scene 3) – which is experiencing unrest: “I sleep in a different place every night,” Felix explains early to Henri. “No guarantee, but I try to make it a little harder for them” (prologue).

Henri, who has been lecturing on tragedy in Munich (one of the many heavy details Miller drops into the exchanges), has returned to tend to his daughter, but he also wants to confront Felix about the country's badly polluted water, and about the shock of seeing a dead baby in the street (scene 1). But such weighty complaints soon give way to a crisis which functions, again, like an Old Comedy happy idea, even though its darkness Swiftian. A young man in the countryside has been exciting the populace, but his saintliness is troubling to the authorities, and thus he is to be crucified – with an advertising agency paying \$75 million for exclusive rights to televise the event. Miller is not Mamet; he writes, as Miller said of O'Neill, “in heavy pencils,” and this satire does

not proceed with unrepentant glee. In fact, Miller cannot respond with anything except stern moral indignation, conveyed via Henri's undisguised outrage; twenty-five of Henri's thirty-three lines between "They will attach commercial announcements!" and "I know you'll call it off now, won't you" are rendered with exclamation points ("My company distributes most of those products, for god's sake!", "The man is hope!", etc.), italics ("*We'll be a contemptible country!*"), or expressed as sanctimonious rhetorical questions ("Is there a hole in the human anatomy we don't make a dollar on?") (scene 1). Miller introduces the film crew, which includes an attractive director named Emily, who inadvertently captures the attention of the womanizing Felix; what happens by way of crisis calls to mind the masculinity-diminishing bedroom insults of both of Shepard's power figures, as it involves Felix's impotence and the savior figure's miraculous ability to beam light, which provides women a sexual satisfaction that is of keen interest to the emasculated General. (Mamet spares President Smith this indignity in *November*, though Don Shewey suggests that in *Romance* Mamet "uses homophobic humor to express straight men's insecurity about their masculinity while mocking it at the same time" (Shewey "Romance"). Impotence is a weakness Emily is willing to exploit, though as Miller's language peters out (his facility with vulgarity pales next to Mamet's), the equation of power and masculinity comes across not as a political trope revived but as an exhausted cliché:

FELIX. I am running a country, Emily, I cannot expose my feelings to . . .

EMILY. I know, but that suppression has spread down and down and down . . .

Running her finger up his arm and down his chest: until it's finally clobbered . . .
your willy (scene 5).

The play's moral characters can only express disgust with the crucifixion plan; the pragmatic/amoral figures, including those providing Felix with the financial windfall he craves to spread wealth/keep peace in his country, insist on seeing it through. Felix, like the cartoonish power figures in Shepard and Mamet, is a one-dimensional thug who plainly states his philosophy early in the play: "Life is complicated, but underneath the principle has never changed since the Romans – fuck them before they fuck you" (scene 1). What follows is the usual array of intimidation ("If you're going to fuck around with me we'll be happy to knock your teeth out, starting with the front" [scene 3]) and ignorance ("How can I think differently if no one else is thinking differently?" [scene 6]). Dramatically, Miller has a difficult time creating insight or sustaining tension.

Miller had taken the idea out for a drier, wittier run in 1992 with a modest proposal published in the *New York Times* headlined "Get It Right. Privatize Executions" (Miller "Get It Right"). The tone was crisply sustained through the course of roughly twenty column inches – brisk and disgusted but not without humor as he wrote it "straight":

People can be executed in places like Shea Stadium before immense paying audiences. The income from the spectacle could be distributed to the prison that fed and housed him or to a trust fund for prisoner rehabilitation and his own family and/or girlfriend, as he himself chose.

The condemned would of course get a percentage of the gate, to be negotiated by his agent or a promoter, if he so desired.

The idea proved difficult to expand to full length in *Resurrection Blues*, which premiered in 2002 at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis but was poorly received. *The New York Times* ventured west to cover the event, with Bruce Weber commenting that the play “Seems indisputably aimed at skewering American values” but was “disappointingly unpersuasive”:

The most significant societal ills that Mr. Miller decries in “Resurrection Blues” are offshoots of the Reagan-era legacy of selfishness as a virtue. Greed, power-mongering, the unfair distribution of wealth, political hypocrisy: all of these serve as illustrations of a prevailing value system that declares acquisitiveness admirable and wealth an end in itself.

From the beginning of Mr. Miller’s career, his work has always been motivated by the contemporary social and political climate, and it’s hard to deny that he’s on point again here. When one character declares that his business major in college included “no philosophy, no culture,” it’s hard not to think of the current spate of corporate scandals and the grotesque Philistinism they represent. (Weber).

This criticism, with its emphasis on a generous description of the theme, is gentler than the judgment rendered by *Variety* (“Unfocused jeremiad” [Ritter]). Yet Miller, not altogether wrongly, blamed the concentrated power of the *Times* review for the play’s demise, telling the *Guardian*, “We had great audiences out in Minneapolis, but nobody wants to produce it on Broadway. It got slammed by the New York Times guy and that killed it” (Campbell). As has been shown, the American habitus indeed denies a visa to a great deal of undisguised theatrical political criticism, yet the more debilitating factor

demonstrated in these plays by Shepard, Mamet and Miller is not strictly one of reception, but of dramatic form (which is in turn shaped by the reception processes and issues of horizon of expectation/vision that include not only criticism but production/play selection and education; it is a reifying, overdetermining loop). In these works, these Olympian U.S. dramatists approach the stage with national commentary – America’s feeble version of Britain’s State of the Nation plays – from positions of political despair; thus each writer is quickly reduced to lampoon, creating the contemporary category of the shenanigan play. Jeffrey Mason easily divines the essence of *Resurrection Blues* when he writes, “The loss of commitment is so crushing we must laugh it off in order to survive. Events have moved beyond serious consideration and submit only to ironic treatment” (Mason 274). But by Kushner’s and Hare’s lights, events have not, *cannot* move beyond serious consideration, and the drama is derelict to think so.³⁹

The issue of politics and dramatic form remains a deeply unsettled question, though it may not be accurate to characterize it in the U.S. as under-theorized (the hazards of theory already have been suggested, and will be further explored in the next chapter). There are, however, formidable ghosts, in Carlson’s sense, to inform contemporary practice, a rich archive from which to fashion a refreshed repertoire and potentially expand the current constrictive horizon of expectations. Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, in their 1986 *Theatre as Weapon: Workers’ Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917-1934*, illustrate that dramaturgical methods have been devised, analyzed and practiced by the most deeply invested of parties – organized people who took to the stage not for *panem et circenses* but its opposite, labor solidarity and (often resistant) political instruction. The book is a deep, comprehensive study of the

histories of workers' theaters across the three countries – their organizational strategies, ties to local parties (Communist and otherwise), rise and fall of membership, productivity, attendance, harassment by police in some instances (Germany and Britain), and analysis of techniques ranging from staging and actor training to the devising and development of scripts. Their findings are useful: the book begins with the U.S.S.R. and the Blue Blouse troupe, whose influence, thanks to touring and to reviews that were published internationally, was “enormous” (Stourac 73). *Theatre as a Weapon* chronicles the theory and practice of Piscator in Germany, and eventually comes to Brecht's melding of radical and bourgeois techniques, but most of the focus is on the local troupes that were tremendous in number and diverse in production approaches. What emerges through the long study is the tension around “plays,” which were often the target of revolutionary zeal; the association with “literary” and “bourgeois” culture were feared as counterproductive to revolutionary aims, which included creating a more thoughtful and participatory spectator and a more probing, purposefully unsettling dramatization of political and social conditions.

In the Soviet Union, Meyerhold, deviser of “biomechanics,” rejected realism and championed movement over language, writing, “The impossibility of embracing the totality of reality justifies the schematization of the real,” and (*contra* Kushner's “Words are the barricades/words pin us down positionally”), “Words in the theater are only embellishments on the design of movement” (Stourac 8-9). The writers note a leap forward in theory and practice with Piscator: “The theatre was no longer to affect the spectator emotionally only . . . it appealed consciously to reason. It was to communicate elation, enthusiasm, thrills, but also clarification, knowledge, understanding” (93).

(Rhetorically, this line has never been entirely satisfactory; it is difficult to pinpoint the appeals of Moliere, Ibsen, Shaw, etc. if they are not appeals to reason, clarification, knowledge, understanding.) In Germany, Piscator was credited by later troupes with the development of a new formal toolbox – short scenes, montage, “distancing narration and report,” simultaneous scenes, breaking through the proscenium arch, engaging the audience (169). Germany’s Red Rockets consciously used the word “troupe” to define their collective focus (107), and they chose a “dialectical montage of musical elements” that would be “developed by (Hans) Eisler and Brecht into a sophisticated cultural weapon” (114). “Speech choruses” were used by Red Forge, directly influenced by Blue Blouse’s tour of Germany (151); scene-and-song montage was an increasingly popular anti-realism strategy among workers’ troupes (153); in Germany, Brecht began working on workers’ sketches as early as 1927 (91).

Repeatedly and in each country, the movements struggled with the issue of how, exactly, to create performance in the wake of rejecting “bourgeois” dramatic traditions (though the Marxist alternatives were no more satisfying, as German practitioners spotted the peril of Marxist “education” dramas: “We must spurn the dry didactic play, void of life and feelings!” [154]). A 1922 manifesto typically declared, “The destruction of the literary chains that fetter theatrical material and limit its effectiveness is unavoidable for the constructive theatre. Therefore our demand: down with the traditional repertoire of ‘plays’” (28). Professional writers were often shunned by Blue Blouse (46); vaudevilles were embraced as popular forms (47). Yet words still had indispensable value, and workers’ theaters often struggled to discover a harmonious balance between images, movement, song, and story. “Lit-montage” featured scenes in combination (48), but the

technique proved more effective at agitation (depicting social/political injustices crudely, emotionally, angrily, mockingly, but at least provoking a visceral response in the audience) than propaganda (promoting intelligent, forward-thinking response, positing alternatives, solutions) (69); almost by definition, the vaudevilles, sketches, songs and montages relied too heavily on “social masks (70). In 1931-32, the German troupe Red Megaphone championed the dialectical play and its attempt to “reach into life”: “They must learn not only to talk about the class struggle, but to *give it shape* by dramatizing the life of its representative, the human being” (163). (Strikingly, the theater-makers were thinking about form pragmatically, looking for the methods best equipped to prompt thought and effect change in audiences [164, and a theme of all the efforts.]

In Britain, Ibsen and Shaw were viewed as influential, with various social strata being represented by individual characters, but the “well-made” play and Shaw’s stylish debate comedies were displaced by episodic structures and the pull of the political cabaret (201). Troupes wrote topical sketches on the move, even on busses (anticipating Hare’s Portable Theatre) as issues evolved (222). In 1932, representatives from British troupes met and resolved themselves against naturalism (though not entirely) and ratified an agit-prop approach, claiming as a practical rationale that their worker-actors would never be genuinely successful at playing nuanced characters; thus the policy of devising types to be performed by the “worker-player” (231-2). In 1977, workers’ theater participant Tom Thomas recalled that the mobility, the engagement with real experiences, and delving past “naturalism” to illustrate underlying problems were all advantages (265). Alternatively, not absorbing and exploiting more “legitimate” techniques and the assets of “bourgeois” culture was a drawback (267).

Stourac and McCreery repeatedly discover troupes foundering on the problem of caricature, a malady that we have seen uniting the contemporary shenanigan plays: “Opponents were too often shown as impotent idiots, cowards and libertines, thereby misleading the spectator into thinking they could be dismissed” (20). The problem occurs among troupes in all three countries, and though theaters dissatisfied with their results sometimes declared that they needed better writers (155), dogma often positioned the movements against conventional playwrights, as was the case with the collectivism of Red Megaphone (168) and with Britain’s agitation sketches (223). The problem was an absence of more efficacious models, or at least models armed with what this study has labeled a “visa” (226). Thus Stourac’s and McCreery’s powerful conclusion: in Britain, “The plays and sketches reflected the class struggle and were often performed in struggle situations, but they were unable to dramatize a complex political argument or analysis” (286). The same conclusion applied to Soviet theater, where the technique was lively and impressive but more successful at agitation than propaganda (287).

The transition to more complex plays required a more detailed, coherent and thorough literary method, which is much more easily achieved by an individual. The principle of collective text production then became an obstacle. This problem was only really tackled in Germany . . . Those troupes flexible enough to adapt their working methods in response to the new objective requirements of the political situation, and which produced their own writers as integral members of the group, began to evolve the necessary dramatic forms (289-90).

Over and over, the starting point of the results-oriented workers' theaters was rough and agitational, featuring beer hall song-and-comedy satire, with broadsides at corrupt capitalist management or governmental authorities delivered in the parodic bursts of street- and union hall-friendly ballads and sketches. The more disciplined the production and the bigger the cast, the more impressive this can be, and much of the work accomplished during this period was indeed powerful. But Stourac and McCreery make clear that nearly all of the workers' theater efforts, while often theoretically and theatrically sophisticated, were politically naïve, only able to advance ideas, situations and characterizations so far. "The problem of play-making," Stourac and McCreery write, "became the main theatrical challenge faced by all these movements" (xiv). "This broken tradition has meant learning lessons all over again" (xiii).

Chapter Four

Erasing the Playwright

David Hare acknowledges the challenge of rendering complex politics in coherent dramatic form at the outset of *The Power of Yes* (2009). The play – commissioned, it is worth noting, by the National Theatre – is drawn from interviews with insiders in the immediate wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Hare creates an Author figure who listens, takes notes and, in direct address to the audience, explains at the beginning that the play is not a play: “It pretends only to be a story,” the Author says. In the second scene, the Author listens to several finance industry professionals; they soon begin to try to sort out which figures were (or were not) “villains” as Western economies descended into crisis:

AUTHOR. Honestly, we’re not going to get anywhere if you insist on writing the play for me. You have to give me the material, not the play.

DAVID M. Yes, I’m just struck by how difficult it is.

AUTHOR. I know it’s difficult.

DAVID M. I don’t envy you. It really is very difficult.

AUTHOR. I know it's difficult. I'll worry about that. You just tell me the story
(*Power* scene 2).

Author/Hare does takes control in this documentary piece, which seems possible in part because Hare and his British cohort maintain a variety of formal arrows in the political-dramaturgical quill. Americans, lacking visa, ghosts forgotten, having lost touch with the archive, continue to experience a crisis in theatrical language as they encounter the political. The formal crisis was dramatized by Arthur Kopit in *The End of the World With Symposium to Follow* (1984), which, like *Power of Yes*, metatheatrically deployed a playwright figure to gather facts and ponder genre. Kopit's Nuclear Age/Cold War plot follows an investigation of nuclear proliferation, an issue of tremendous concern in the early to mid-1980s, with Ronald Reagan's controversial 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (aka "Star Wars") viewed in some quarters as a bold escalation of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. arms race. The play initially takes the shape of a detective story; the twist is that the "detective" is a playwright given a mysterious commission, the roots of which he is compelled to unearth, like any good investigator.

Kopit creates a film noir atmosphere of shadows and conundrums; he costumes Trent, his playwright-protagonist, in a trench coat, and has Trent address his wife as "Dollface." The first section of this three part (but two act) play is an inside showbiz farce, with Trent approaching his agent – Kopit's own agent, the famed Audrey Wood⁴⁰ – for advice; this leads to punch lines with fatuous Hollywood executives who wonder, in the standard movie-executives-are-idiots trope, whether the project could be tailored as a musical or a major film. The tone is frivolous, but Kopit's subject is revealing: the

inability of the stage to cope formally with a weighty, complicated political subject. Still, Trent is granted permission to proceed, and *End of the World* moves into its middle section, which takes the form of a factual investigation. This passage is riveting: Trent listens as Washington authorities explain deterrence, détente and the arms race, describing the tactical advantages of first strike and how “anticipatory retaliation” sounds better than “pre-emption” and “pre-pre-emption.” Kopit at times resorts to snappy repartee that stands as relief from an avalanche of theory and revelation, for much of the data and dialogue is informed by journalist Robert Scheer’s 1982 book *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War*; Kopit anticipates and even contemplates the documentary play that would begin to take firm shape and achieve producing/public traction shortly after the appearance of this work. In an author’s note, Kopit writes, “The events that unfold in my play mirror, almost exactly, the experiences I had when I embarked on the commission”; much is based on personal interviews, some with people who chose to remain anonymous, and Scheer’s *With Enough Shovels* is the basis of Stone’s speech about birds on fire, a horrific sight he beheld in the South Pacific as he witnessed an atomic test.

The factual basis of section two lends the play an impressive authority, but Kopit is not done with his consideration of form. In part three, Kopit begins to fashion a conventional “play,” but the result is a disappointing parable. The shady figure from the opening, Stone, is revealed to be someone who once visited Trent when he was a new father and meditated on the power of tossing his child out the window, and that is how nuclear war will start, the characters agree: with a profound, morbid curiosity about unfettered supremacy and might, and with an intellectual/ethical inability to resist evil.

This storybook moralizing reads simplistically after the nuanced data and realpolitik complexities unearthed by (and staged as) reportage. Yet the political facts that Kopit advances as the play's fundamental truth claims are alarming and compelling. In *End of the World*, Kopit foregrounds the formal struggle: his plot dramatizes the impossibility/absurdity of writing a play about this formidable subject. (An indication of how the anti-political habitus has hardened, as well as how the political topics of interest have changed: *End of the World* opened at the Kennedy Center in 1984 before transferring to Broadway.) Contemporary American dramatists drawn toward the topical but daunted by the habitus have learned to push Kopit's metatheatrical experiment to its logical conclusion, abolishing the conventions of "fictionalized" theater (invented plot and character) and foregrounding raw data and actual people and events. As will be seen, the verbatim/docudrama form foreshadowed by Kopit has become the chief response to/refuge from the crisis regarding American theatrical language and politics.

The roots of the post-*Angels/Fires/Absence* drive toward non-fiction include a well-rehearsed critical unease and even animosity, particularly in the academy, toward realism and the well-made play. The case of Wendy Wasserstein, the most popular and acclaimed female American playwright since Lillian Hellman, reveals an antipathy so deep and unresolved that it is worth exploring at some length. Claudia Barnett, seeking contributors to her *Wendy Wasserstein: A Casebook* (1999), discovered a widespread academic dismissal of Wasserstein, which she summarizes in the view of one of the many scholars who rebuffed her approaches: "I'm sorry, but I don't think that Wendy Wasserstein merits critical comment" (Barnett xi). That unnamed critic hardly stands alone; Wasserstein's warm, disarming brand of comedy made her a target, but so did her

politics (which sharply critiqued second and third wave feminism) and the traditional structure of her plays. Janet V. Haedicke, taking aim at Wasserstein and other popular female American dramatists emerging in the 1980s (Marsha Norman among them), uses film theorist Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the male gaze⁴¹ to frame an argument about the incompatibility of realism and feminism. Haedicke summarizes the standard feminist suspicion of dramatic realism (see Sue-Ellen Case⁴² and Jill Dolan, among others) as she contends that the form normalizes restrictive patriarchal patterns that female playwrights have been too willing to soften, rendering realism useless as a progressive tool.

The argument was leveled against Wasserstein's Pulitzer- and Tony-winning *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) by numerous critics. The highly popular play, which surveys changes in America's socio-political landscape (with a weather eye on feminism) from the 1960s through the late 1980s, was widely attacked for a) its passive title character, who in scene after scene is overwhelmed by more self-possessed figures (male and female); b) its depiction of feminism via a consciousness-raising session that is arguably rife with stereotypes (the setting is an Ann Arbor basement, and the "with us or against us" feminist test is articulated by a leader's declaration to an uncertain Heidi that "You either shave your legs or you don't"); c) its emotional climax, which hinges not on any choice, recognition or reversal by Heidi but on a corrective lecture by Peter, the gay doctor she loves, as he delivers an impassioned speech on the toll taken by the mysterious scourge, AIDS; d) its use of comedy and the temporal signifier of pop music ("You Send Me," "Respect") to "soften" its realism; e) its limited social strata, which skews toward white middle and upper classes⁴³; and f) its conclusion, which finds Heidi finally standing

as a self-proclaimed equal with Scoop, the successful journalist/publisher who rejected Heidi – an art historian with her own career – for a simpler wife figure (a “six,” not a “ten,” in the charismatic but chauvinistic Scoop’s reductive grade- and ratings-oriented vernacular). For the critics, the particularly crippling aspect of Heidi’s final stand of equality is that she defines herself through the traditional domestic role of motherhood: by play’s end, Heidi has adopted a baby girl.⁴⁴ Wasserstein later recalled discussing that plot choice in a public forum, during which two women art historians at Cornell “lit into me for 45 minutes” (Jacobson 267).

Many, though not all, of the *Heidi* critiques are encapsulated in Phyllis Jane Rose’s “Dear Heidi: An Open Letter to Dr. Holland,” published in *American Theatre* October 1989. “How more safely for critics to navigate the current backlash against feminism than to acclaim a self-proclaimed feminist playwright who actually reinscribes dominant notions of female identity?” Haedicke writes; the “backlash” Haedicke refers to is described at length in Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). “Heidi represents a tentative self rather than the tenuous subjectivity which could have subverted paradigmatic male-female hierarchies” (209-10). Heidi’s self is tenuous indeed, as Wasserstein’s character recognizes as early as 1968:

SCOOP. You’re thinking something.

HEIDI. Actually, I was wondering what mothers teach their sons that they never bother to tell their daughters.

SCOOP. What do you mean?

HEIDI. I mean, why the fuck are you so confident? (*Heidi* 171).

The “tenuous subjectivity” that Haedicke suggests can be found in her promoting of the often absurdist works of Tina Howe, and in the examples Jill Dolan explores at length in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1991), which ultimately settles on the genre- and gender-bending noir sendups written and performed by Holly Hughes, an example that foregrounds and interrogates narrative form and gender performativity. The works by Hughes and the troupe Split Britches, performed for a largely lesbian audiences at the WOW Café in downtown Manhattan, create a female spectator (or gaze) that is the antidote to the dilemma first framed by Mulvey. Dolan’s theorizing concentrates on form and the implicit audience it generates; her project is to posit and demonstrate an alternative position for, as the title promises, the spectator. Buttressing Mulvey, Dolan attacks “phallogocentrism,” or organizing phallic authority in language, while acknowledging “scopophilia,” pleasure derived from looking, and she cites Teresa deLauretis’s claim that “Male desire drives all narrative and objectifies women,” which inevitably creates a hostile environment by allowing no subject position for a female spectator (12-13). Dolan identifies three strands (separate from the “waves”) of feminism, the weakest being the “liberal” feminism that seeks acceptance and transformation from within existing systems, rather than radical structural change. This is the feminism that applies to Wasserstein and *Heidi*: “Their desire to become part of a system that has historically excluded them forces some liberal feminists in theater to acquiesce to their erasure as women,” Dolan writes. “Little changes, even as stronger women characters are written into their plays, because the universal to which they write is still based on the male model” (Dolan *Feminist* 5). Dolan’s position among the feminisms she identifies is essential to her critique: she expresses dissatisfaction with the liberal and cultural

feminisms. Cultural feminism substitutes female-centricity for male-centricity – Cixous is an influence – but, problematically for Dolan, leaves unaddressed differences in class, race, and culture. Schroeder likewise is suspicious of the “essentializing” quality of cultural feminism, its assumption of biological determinism that “elides the enormous differences among women” (Schroeder 24). Dolan’s preference is for the material feminism that focuses on social roles and performativity; thus Hughes, playing upon the surfaces of storytelling and gender and upending convention, becomes Dolan’s champion.

In Dolan’s materialist context, the realism and liberal feminism of Wasserstein are retrograde, certainly in the case of *Heidi*, a work Dolan sharply rejected:

Missing from Wasserstein’s play and from the feminist history her realist narrative distorts is the motivating fuel of women’s rage at their marginalization and repression by the dominant discourse. Rather than acknowledging the political power of rage and mourning its repression in the ‘new age,’ Wasserstein’s political project explicitly trivializes women’s anger (Dolan *Presence* 54).

One cannot accuse Dolan of not knowing the play well: despite her disdain for its politics and shape, she agreed to direct a university production of *Heidi*, seeking alternative design and performance choices “to flesh out the presentation of feminist and progressive history on which the play cheats,” intending to subvert what she saw as the play’s parody of activism and its passive central character. “In many cases, despite our efforts, the play

won,” Dolan concludes, though the production she describes in detail plainly put up an epic fight (Dolan *Presence* 56-58). (The conclusion of *Feminist Spectator* reveals why Dolan can be such an appealing critic; despite the near-granite cast of her ideology, Dolan is fearless about questioning her own conclusions out loud, and in acknowledging that a kind of pluralism among the three strands of feminism was becoming evident in performance trends, she “admits to heterogeneity,” and promises that materialism “will be located within these differences” [121]. As seen in part through her eventual reassessment of Wasserstein, her forecast was prophetic.)

Subverting the swift tide of Wasserstein’s popular political project was difficult, as was the attempt to undo the play’s brand of realism in the name of a compellingly disputed literary dogma. “I have never been convinced that realism is male,” writes Jan Balakian in *Reading the Plays of Wendy Wasserstein* (2010). Balakian finds much feminist promise in Wasserstein’s comic realist oeuvre, writing, “Wasserstein’s plays convey that with greater freedom came more confusion” (3-4), and “Each play reflects the yawning gap between the ideal of social justice and the reality of inequality. From that tension comes the possibility of transforming our social structure, which is the ultimate goal of drama” (11). Judith E. Barlow defends the realistic form in “Feminism, Realism, and Lillian Hellman” (in *Demastes*); like J. Ellen Gainor in that useful volume, Barlow persuasively addresses the arguments of Case, Dolan, et. al., decrying the needless collateral damage of the wholesale attack on realism. Barlow chooses *The Little Foxes* (1939) as a vehicle of refutation, though she begins with the postmodern move of identifying the destabilization of “reality” via the sheer volume of acting and falsification goes on throughout the Hellman’s play. (Lying is rampant, and even the first moments

are a conspicuously synthetic display for the rich industrialist visitor to the south.) But Barlow also observes that realism is prevented from wielding any ideological tyranny due in part to the built-in variability of performance and the instabilities of production and reception. Barlow also cites Hellman's invocation of the intentional fallacy ("I don't think what writers intend makes very much difference. It's what comes out" (164), argues that readers and audiences are capable of perceiving when and how authors arrange for effect their fictive worlds, even worlds rooted in realism, and invokes Terry Eagleton's eminently sensible starting point that "every literary text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced." She adds, "All plays have designs upon the viewer, are acts of coercion" (163).

Disputing the claim of realism's inherent reactionary politics, Barlow analyzes Regina's independence and strength, venal as her motives are; Birdie's systematic exploitation and oppression (a critique of domestic politics that, Barlow argues, requires a realistic domestic site to be exposed); and Alexandra's blossoming into something representative of the revolutionary spirit in the last moments of the play ("I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting . . . someplace else"). "The last moments of *Foxes* owe more to the agitprop theater of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States than to the well-made play," Barlow writes (162), and indeed, Hellman tosses the conclusion to the viewer. Though the audience is familiar with the drama's post-Civil War history, Hellman's open ending makes it clear the struggle was still politically alive at the time of production in 1939.

Loren Kruger, in her study of national theater movements *The National Stage: Theater and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America* (1992), warns in passing against mathematically equating form with meaning. “Drama’s capacity for social critique cannot be simply read off its formal resistance to prevailing conventions,” Kruger writes. “The conventions of domestic drama are not inevitably conservative, nor do innovative forms on their own directly challenge the status quo, although they may represent its limitations” (19). Patricia Schroeder concurs at length in *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (1996):

Surely it is the purpose to which a form is put, its use within an ideological context at a specific historical moment, that determines its effectiveness as a feminist challenge . . . The first reason to reevaluate realism is simple: realism was created not only to reflect social conditions but also to comment on them (25, 36).

Schroeder pragmatically embraces realism’s popular appeal but also addresses the post-structural suspicion of realism’s presumed stable reality and stable characters, which argues that realism is an inaccuracy, a sham, or a bad pretense. In her later chapters, Schroeder explores how American realist drama almost always accommodates notions of instability, contending that very little realism is “straight,” that the form has nearly always been malleable, and that there has always been a sense of instability in individual and nation psyches. Feminism’s fierce objection to realism is traceable, Schroeder contends, to the rebellions in both the women’s movement and in theater of the 1960s that promulgated understandable but misguided twinned attitudes, the claim that all

things identifiable with patriarchy, realism included, are reactionary (25). But she suggests that hardened opposition can run counter to sense. Schroeder disputes Case's claims of realism's determinism, its presumed dependencies on domesticities and husbands that make realism "a prisonhouse of art" for women (27), and, like Barlow, pushes back against fears of passive audience response that ignores "materialist conditions of production" – variables in geography, venue, staging, audience, etc., a suite of angles that Schroeder feels materialist feminists overlook at their peril (30).

Surveying works from the turn of 20th century through the 1980s (though with no mention of Wasserstein), Schroeder makes a case for realism as a historically proven protest tool, the rejection of which would be elitist and ahistorical. (Schroeder concludes two of her chapters with references to Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto," which argues for new hybrid creations pieced together from disparate forms and philosophies; Haraway's essay can be read as profoundly fluid and non-dogmatic in its baseline suspicion of any essentializing theory.) As Schroeder pursues a comparison between Sean O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* and Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind*, she observes that the plays suggest cultural identity as dependent upon action and words: "It is performative rather than a static identity position" (129).

Dolan relaxed her hard line anti-realist stance in "Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein" (2008), first recapping her original position:

The Heidi Chronicles, I insisted, actually belittles and dismisses the very movement it pretends to archive. Its form – realist comedy – and its context –

Broadway and subsequently American regional theaters – meant a priori that the play was ideologically corrupt and had nothing useful to say to or about feminism (433).

Dolan's "a priori" is the argument's Achilles heel, something she struggles with in her reevaluation of Wasserstein (and beyond). As a critic with clear political goals, Dolan covets Wasserstein's audience, which, by theater standards, is larger than most. That realpolitik recognition hearkens back to the fundamental efforts of workers' theaters to communicate with the widest possible public, and to Trevor Griffiths's statement about what ought to be, in his view, the irrefutable power and allure of television for socialist writers. "I regret the exclusivity of these claims and how dogmatic they sometimes became," Dolan writes of her prior sweeping anti-realist position. "I do think that partly as a result of the taxonomy of feminisms, the subaltern prevailed in our scholarship and our criticism" (437-8). As Dolan notes in a belated insight the like of which could begin to undo certain hardened facets of the anti-political habitus, rote suspicion of the mass audience and popular forms risks self-marginalization:

Many American feminist performance theorists and critics have historically looked to the outside or the margins for effective, socially critical theater. Perhaps it is now time to acknowledge the potential of looking inside as well, and to address feminism as a critique or value circulating within our most commercial theatres . . . I now find tedious the somewhat facile pose of scholars always looking for the next new outlaw or the most outré performance examples to boast as aesthetically radical and politically subversive . . . By taking her [Wasserstein]

seriously, we give ourselves *license* to look at popular theater as a vital location of pleasure, perspicacity and political possibility (435-6, emphasis added).

Visa granted, political possibilities tumble forth: “Although Wasserstein’s work falls squarely in the realist genre,” Dolan writes, “her ability to textualize history with such temporal juxtapositions in her plays’ narratives lends them a more socially critical edge” (447). Dolan credits Wasserstein for shifting the drama’s subject from father-son to mother-daughter, and for productively exploiting that fundamental relationship as a site of generational value battles (448). Dolan notes Wasserstein’s “Shavian style” that “rejects subtext and psychology,” and declares, “While I do not condone her tendency to belittle certain kinds of feminism, I do think these monologues make her realism pedagogical – hardly a Brechtian learning play, but intent on teaching us something (and something about women) nonetheless” (452). Late in the essay, Dolan claims, “While all of realism’s problems remain . . . the rules about how it is used have loosened” (455). The passive construction is troubling; it declines to name who makes and applies the rules, who determines when and why the rules can or cannot be changed. The construction illustrates the *habitus* at work, a powerfully implied horizon of expectations stretched only grudgingly, and only in the face of a body of work already ensconced in the archive and demonstrably ratified by the producing and theatergoing public.

Despite the acclaim for and the controversy over *Heidi*, Wasserstein proved to be ineffective as a political writer in the single instance when she attempted a large dramatic statement on recognizable public events, *An American Daughter*. Surprisingly, in *A Casebook* Claudia Barnett finds the characters in Wasserstein’s *An American Daughter* to

be more “authentic” and Wasserstein’s wit more purposeful in the arch, dramatically improbable, linguistically stiff *An American Daughter* than in the fluidly funny and emotionally affecting *Heidi*, though the tone of Barnett’s critique is less analytical than enthusiastic as she repeats the phrase “I like” and applies it to such elements of the drama as discovering female characters not merely in conflict with men, but with each other (Barnett 150). (Women were abundantly in conflict in the subtler *Heidi*, of course; note the arc of Heidi’s friend Susan, who metamorphoses from boy-crazy teen in the 1960s to feminist activist in the 1970s to fast-talking Hollywood producer in the 1980s, with the tentative Heidi – an art historian who is consistently able to take a long view – increasingly estranged.)

Though *Heidi* remains Wasserstein’s signature play – most popular, most anthologized, most awarded and debated – *An American Daughter*, produced on Broadway in 1997, is her most directly political work. The parallels between the plays are striking, and not altogether felicitous. Both articulate a key character as deeply “sad” (Heidi, Judith). Both use medical figures with “bigger” problems as the protagonists’ confidants and diagnosticians/*raisonneurs* (Peter, Judith). Both use pop songs as sentimental touchstones – the 42 year old Surgeon General nominee Lyssa Dent Hughes dances alone to “You’re Sixteen” at the beginning of *An American Daughter*, while “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” cues the final scene – and both feature diminutive nicknames for the protagonists, spoken chiefly by the dominant male figures (Scoop calls Heidi “Heidela,” Lyssa’s father, a U.S. Senator, calls her “Mousy,” and Lyssa’s husband, a noted liberal intellectual, calls her “Lizard”). Both plays display their female protagonists breaking down in a media glare, and both feature climactic, summative, culturally

explanatory speeches – Milleresque statements – for their central characters. Both draw on American history, though *An American Daughter* narrows its focus to the crisis week of Lyssa’s unsuccessful nomination process to a cabinet post. Transparently, the plot recycled the still-green Clinton administration’s controversial, scandal-tinged attorney general nominations of Kimba Wood, Zoe Baird, and Lani Guinier, each of which failed, as Wasserstein notes in her preface to the play’s published version, within the administration’s first hundred days.

An American Daughter was, in part, the comically gifted Wasserstein’s attempt to sustain a serious tone, as she explained in that preface:

But a writer doesn’t grow just to prove she is capable of higher jumps or new tricks. On the contrary, I believe the content must dictate the form . . . If Chekhov was the icon of *The Sisters Rosensweig*⁴⁵ then Ibsen would be the postfeminist muse of *An American Daughter*. The topicality of the play would be merely a container for a deeper problem (viii-ix).

The form is perhaps less Ibsenesque than Shavian, crowded as it is with slightly outsized characters given parody names as colorful as Shotover, Hushaby and Undershaft, and crowded as it is with slightly improbable incidents. The single setting is the living room of a house in the tony, deep-inside-the-Beltway locale of Georgetown, keying expectations of drawing room comedy/melodrama that are largely met. That setting turns out to be a busy enough intersection of power figures to destroy Lyssa’s nomination for Surgeon General, the second such nomination to sink; as Walter relays in dialogue with Lyssa, she was viewed as a “safe” follow-up to the administration’s first failed candidate.

Wasserstein, hewing close to the news, creates in Lyssa Dent Hughes an impeccable professional with a personal flaw that mires her in controversy before a confirmation process can even begin. Like *Resurrection Blues*, much of *An American Daughter*'s subject is the infantilizing function of media: the action begins with a view of Lyssa as shown on TV and ends with her offstage son's report of public opinion of Lyssa as expressed in an online chat. The play is dedicated to longtime journalist Michael Kinsley; Julie Salamon's biography *Wendy and the Lost Boys: The Uncommon Life of Wendy Wasserstein* (2010), which takes a substantially greater interest in Wasserstein's life than in her art, reports that Kinsley threw a party for Wasserstein specifically to introduce her to journalists for this project. (Wasserstein already had at least one strong journalistic connection in *New York Times* theater critic turned political columnist Frank Rich, but their relationship was so close – borderline romantic – that Rich routinely recused himself from reviewing her work.)

The play's conspicuously fizzy character names bespeak comedy of manners. The ambitious, slightly fatuous young (“about 27,” according to stage directions) feminist is Quincy Quince; the TV newsman who brings his crew to Lyssa's home for an interview is Timber Tucker; Lyssa's gay right wing friend is Morrow McCarthy; Lyssa's well-connected husband (who can claim two friends already in the Cabinet) has the Brahmin name of Walter Abrahamson; the Senator Alan Hughes – Lyssa's father, and a descendant of Ulysses S. Grant – has a new wife, Charlotte “Chubby” Hayes, who can laugh about being called “Chubby” because she is thin as a rail. Individually, perhaps the character names are not so far-fetched: TV journalist Timber Tucker sounds like a deliberate amalgam of Wolf Blitzer and Tucker Carlson, and Quincy Quince is arguably less

unlikely than Krystal Ball, a young political pundit on MSNBC. But in the play the aggregation is distracting. The names are conspicuous, as is the ultra-pithy Sunday chat show banter favored not only by Timber Tucker; it is Wasserstein's *lingua franca* as she depicts the push and pull of ideas in a none-too-private corner (despite the domestic setting) of the public sphere. The young Quincy Quince and Morrow McCarthy, in particular, speak in sound bites. They are rising media stars: Quincy has published a feminist tract titled *The Prisoner of Gender*, while Morrow has just sold a screenplay to Disney for seven figures. Wasserstein's older, more sober characters – namely Dr. Judith B. Kaufman, the black Jewish oncologist who is Lyssa's closest friend – view them with suspicion:

QUINCY. I learned from my mother that a woman's life can have no boundaries.

JUDITH. Do you mind if I lie down?

QUINCY. Should I get Lyssa? Are you not feeling well?

JUDITH. Quincy, time will teach you that a woman's life is all about boundaries. Would you mind passing me that pillow? Organized religion always gives me a migraine.

QUINCY. I see life completely differently than you do.

JUDITH. Diversity is the succor of the nineties (act 1 scene 1).

Amid the chipper quips and bright caricatures, *An American Daughter* labors with political reality, even as it explores a notorious episode of then-contemporary American history so widely understood that it acquired a popular nickname (“Nannygate”). Unlike Hare's rigorous burrowing into campaign dynamics in *Absence*, Wasserstein's focus

grows diffuse, informed more by the patterns of popular storytelling (colorful character, suspenseful incident) than by political events and decisions. The young feminist Quincy is patently a figure of fun, and her illicit kiss with Lyssa's husband, Walter, at the climax of Act 1's third scene, is a baffling red herring. Clinton-Lewinsky and a swollen catalogue of executive and congressional sex scandals aside, the circumstances are naggingly implausible as Walter risks kissing Quincy in a full house with a reporter en route to cover the nomination; per melodrama, of course Lyssa walks in to witness the betrayal. Morrow McCarthy is inexplicable as a self-described "best friend" to the Dents, not only because his politics are conservative while Lyssa and Walter are famous liberals.

More problematically, it is difficult to accept that the media-savvy Morrow, while pontificating on camera, would disclose that Lyssa has never served on a jury, thus revealing the "Nannygate"-like peccadillo that quickly destroys Lyssa's nomination. Wasserstein's characters are nothing if not well-drilled on Capitol Hill protocol, yet the play proceeds with perplexing indifference to the caution that politicians, nominees and their entire circles embody when scandal is in the air. (Anna Deavere Smith, whose interviews for her verbatim projects have included hundreds of political figures for various works including her study of the presidency, *House Arrest*, consistently refers to the rarity of public figures diverging from talking points or speaking with unintended candor as "verbal undress.") Surely a heightened state of verbal watchfulness would be the operational mode for any inner circle invited into the nominee's home for a televised brunch interview with Lyssa cast as the "rescue" nominee after the president's first Cabinet choice failed. Morrow is ascribed no personal motivation for torpedoing his "best friend"'s chance at a Cabinet position, and it is hard to credit a practiced pundit with such

a gabby gaffe; the device seems extraordinarily labored for a purportedly well-researched realistic play, as if Wasserstein could not determine exactly how the public would learn that Lyssa may have shirked her citizen's duty to serve on a jury. Being casually outed by a friend during an in-home television interview qualifies as novel.

It is difficult for a politically-minded drama to sustain such flaws in its major plot points, and the remainder of *An American Daughter* is too diffuse to erase such concerns. Wasserstein all but changes the subject in the fourth scene of Act 1 as Lyssa tries to spin "Jurygate" favorably, and then the play, repeating the technique in *Heidi*, pulls back and examines its doctor character, who supplies a wider social diagnosis. Judith arrives, having thrown herself in the Potomac in a suicide attempt that is badly explained in a pithy speech that further augments the troubling implausibility (Judith dragged herself out of the river and walked back to Georgetown). The story spreads thinly as Wasserstein provides her many characters with opportunities to articulate their wisdom: the Senator (who nimbly avoids being pinned down to any position on camera), the Senator's wife (who gives Lyssa private pointers on spousal survival), the young media consultant named Billy, plus more from Quincy, Morrow and Walter.

An American Daughter was poorly received as critics noted the overbroad canvas and lack of depth. The protagonist was again viewed as "passive," Brantley wrote, "in a role that seems little more than a poster for Ms. Wasserstein's feelings about a country that continues to thwart its best and brightest women" (Brantley "In the Hostile Glare"). The topic was certainly fertile; the particular hazards facing women at the highest levels of American public life came into view again as late as post-election 2012 during the flap surrounding U.N. ambassador Susan Rice, who, in a sequence of historical ghosting (or,

similarly, in refreshed repertoire from Taylor's cultural archive) that Wasserstein would have found dismaying, withdrew her potential nomination as Secretary of State before President Obama could even put her forward. The controversy swirled over both what Rice *did* and what was done *to* her: after the deadly September 2012 attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, Rice appeared on all five Sunday morning chat shows and indicated that the incident was spontaneous, not a planned terrorist/Al Qaeda attack. Her blanket appearance was striking, and her information was not persuasive. Her facts soon proved to be erroneous, raising questions including whether Rice knew the intelligence was flawed and whether she knowingly helping shape a political narrative to maintain President Obama's anti-terrorist bona fides during the campaign. Rice's name was widely circulated as Obama's choice to replace outgoing Secretary Hillary Clinton, but Republican criticism, based largely on the Sunday morning performances, was vigorous. In Rice's defense, the President remarked, oddly, that Rice's detractors "should go after me . . . When they go after the U.N. ambassador, apparently because they think she's an easy target, then they've got a problem with me."

The day after Rice withdrew her name from potential nomination, *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus put the issue in Wasserstein's terms when she wrote,

I cannot help but believe that the attack had something to do with Rice's gender, and her sharp elbows and sometimes sharper tongue. Men can have those flaws and still succeed; women find themselves marked down. This is a new, subtler sexism: Rice failed to fit the modern model of collegial, division-healing woman . . . I am not saying that the president is sexist, not at all. But I think that phrasing is telling – besmirch her reputation, go after me, easy target – and I doubt that he

would have used that language in coming to the defense of a man who was a potential nominee (Marcus “Susan”).

Adjacent to Marcus’s Dec. 14 column was an essay by Rice, “I Made the Right Call.” The political dynamic remained as little understood in 2012 as it was at the time of *An American Daughter*, and though Brantley identified Wasserstein as “one of the few American playwrights since S. N. Behrman to create commercial comedies of manners with moral and social heft,” the play’s failure arguably stemmed primarily from its refusal or inability to sustain its gaze on the very issue it raised: the injustice of political/public processes. The drama’s milieu, though grounded in the first stage of a Cabinet confirmation process, is neither as intensely nor (perhaps more problematically) as consistently political as in *Absence of War*, in which Hare’s characters are defined entirely by their jobs, ideological positions and strategies, and in which the settings add up to a spatially panoramic view (as distinct from *Heidi*’s ambitious temporal panorama) of political locales. In *Daughter*, Wasserstein’s characters all have personal relationships first – friend, parent, wife, lover – and they never venture beyond the living room. Even so, Wasserstein claimed to be breaking new ground for politics on the American stage:

Over the years I’ve begun to feel a political claustrophobia in the American theater. Even in the most challenging plays, those on the right are in the wrong and those on the left are crusading for good. I wanted to mix things up a bit . . . If my writing was going to stretch, I wanted the theater’s political correctness to stretch with it (*Daughter* x-xi).

Resisting stereotype simply by creating such mockable figures as a gay conservative and a self-absorbed feminist suggest a very low American bar for political complexity.

Wasserstein was more assured with *Third* (2004), an incisive portrait of a feminist professor so prone to stereotyping that she wrongly accuses a young, wealthy, conservative white male of plagiarism. The play's title refers to the young man's nickname – he is Woodson Bull III – and invokes feminism's third wave, which appears to be the intellectually curious Third's position until Laurie Jameson, his avowedly old-school second-wave professor, dogmatically refuses to acknowledge his capabilities and railroads him into the campus judicial process. (It is difficult to engage the play without reference to Wasserstein's own collisions with ideology in academia.) Again, the figures speak of current events – professor Laurie Jameson rants passionately but ineffectually at the television presence of president George W. Bush, angrily declaring, “He's not my president,” while the student Third wears his conservatism lightly; there is no mistaking the very pointed political thrust of *Third*.

The dominant language, however, beginning with Jameson's lecture on *King Lear* (much as *Heidi* opens with its art history lecture) is essentially academic and domestic, featuring classroom and campus office dialogue and intimate exchanges between Jameson and her inner circle. Jameson's daughter occupies a contested emotional/moral space between Jameson and Third, and a professor colleague of Jameson's suffers from pancreatic cancer, again providing Wasserstein with a health-driven remove from the immediacy of political squabbles toward a cosmic, life-and-death, friends-as-family view. This tactic succeeds in *Heidi* and *Third* because politics is not keyed as dominant. The torn-from-the-headlines scenario of *Daughter* replicated the historic dramatic pattern

thoroughly documented by Carlson to “ghost” stories audiences know – in this case, the public humiliations of would-be cabinet members Wood and Baird and also, by close temporal and procedural association, Anita Hill. The demands imposed on the dramatist by that deep public familiarity, however, include issues of linguistic and behavioral verisimilitude (absent a keying of a pronounced style that sweeps the audience into an alternate performance reality) that Wasserstein’s jokey rendition of inside-the-Beltway patois does not easily accommodate. The problem of plausibly representing political reality is a far more intractable issue for *An American Daughter* than claims about the shackles of realistic form.

Yet the formal argument persists, with Dolan returning to the anti-realist dogma in her blog *The Feminist Spectator* for a post March 16, 2009 regarding Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Ruined*, about women in the Congo trying to survive in a war zone:

Would that Nottage had maintained her singular, Brechtian vision of the consequences of war for women to a more bitter end, instead of capitulating to realism’s mandate that narratives resolve with heterosexual marriage that solves everything. The gender politics of the Congo that *Ruined* describes with such force are compromised by this conservative happy ending.

Of course the continuing contest over realism is hardly limited to feminism. In the 1990 “New Historicism and American Theater History: Toward an Interdisciplinary Paradigm for Scholarship,” one of Bruce A. McConachie’s suggested areas of study is “the

ideological limitations of the major movements of theatrical realism in America”; he adds, “Do later realisms in the theater continue to mask the social construction of race, gender, class, and ethnicity in the same way [as Belasco and turn of the century realism]?” (268-70). Brian Richardson captures the flux as he introduces the Demas book with “The Struggle for the Real – Interpretive Conflict, Dramatic Method, and the Paradox of Realism,” noting that realism was a dominant tool for feminists all through the twentieth century, as well as for African American playwrights and almost all plays dramatizing the AIDS epidemic, suggesting “that realism has an epistemological power and social efficacy far beyond that of the mere ‘fabrication’ that contemporary theory insists on calling it” (15).

The history of “art” or “propaganda” in black theater is notably rich and unresolved, dating to the differing visions of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke. Henry Miller charts the rift in *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art vs. Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965*, and Larry Neal captures the friction in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, in which Stanley Crouch declares that the 1960s movement “produced nothing close to a masterpiece, that failed, as all propaganda – however well intentioned – inevitably fails” (4). The fault lines manifested briefly but sharply in 2005 as playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’s interviewed August Wilson on the occasion of *Radio Golf*, the most contemporary entry in Wilson’s decades cycle. *Radio Golf* is set in 1997, with a poster of Tiger Woods displayed prominently on the wall of a real estate development office; it is a baldly political play and conspicuously “well-made,” with the plot hinging on the discovery of an overlooked property deed and an unexpected reunion of key figures who did not even know they were blood relations. *Radio Golf* is also a

melodrama, with would-be Pittsburgh mayoral candidate Harmond Wilks ultimately as the hero and his old friend and business partner, the corporate-minded, golf-obsessed Roosevelt Hicks as the villain. (In separate productions on Broadway and at Washington, D.C.'s Studio Theatre, the performances concluded with the image of Wilks donning war paint, signifying his engagement with the anti-corporate battle and solidarity with the common man.⁴⁶) Hicks is satisfyingly denounced in a *scene a faire* with the straight-talking handyman Sterling Johnson, who dismissively labels Hicks as a "Negro." This is a label Parks feels compelled to peel off of Wilson as she asks about the "architecture" and "structure" of the play, which she finds to be less rigid and, it is plainly implied, less accommodationist than Wilson's critics apparently have judged: "You're not a Negro. I mean, in line with what Sterling Johnson says to Roosevelt Hicks, Mr. Wilson, you're not a Negro. You're totally not a Negro, and a lot of people think you are" (Parks 547). The awkwardly expressed praise illustrates the formal tension that black playwrights continue to confront. "The debate goes on today," James V. Hatch writes in his forward to Miller's history (1).

Of realism's struggle, Richardson writes:

It should not be surprising that realism has no place in current literary theory. Almost every type of formalism denies any connection between the world and the literary text; most varieties of poststructuralism deny the distinction between factual and fictional narratives; every text is for them necessarily fictional. Given such presuppositions, it is only to be expected that realism is disavowed: these paradigms cannot in principle comprehend even the theoretical possibility of realism (Demastes 1).

Of the fundamental problem of “the real” and of the irresolvable presence of the subjective in the apparently objective, Richardson acknowledges, “They [realist dramas] claim to be true but can never be neutral” (Richardson 9), which Schroeder points out is a transparent convention well understood by literate (which is to say nearly all theater) audiences. Yet the rabbit hole of the obscure meaning of “the real” often proves an irresistible aesthetic and critical lure: see Mireia Aragay’s review of Varun Begley’s *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* as it identifies “the kind of art that most successfully articulates dissidence and resistance by, paradoxically, ‘refusing society’s reality principle’ through formal estrangement and alienation” and Pinter’s “systematic resistance to meaningmaking” (Aragay).⁴⁷ This line, critically and interpretively rich as it is, seems irreconcilable with the kind of blatantly and purposefully populist political theater modeled by Kushner, who frankly targeted the tepid American stage with the second half of this statement in a special issue of the journal *Theatre* titled *Theatre and Social Change*: “Because I believe that justice is not always unknowable, I believe there are conundrums that can be resolved, on stage and off; and I do not believe that a steadfast refusal to be partisan is, finally, a particularly brave or moral or even interesting choice” (*Theatre* 63-4).

The crisis of representation is multi-pronged. To briefly re-rehearse and expand the forbidding horizon of expectations is to see that at times the problem is not even formal, but generic, with the entire field of U.S. drama battling, as London put it, “irrelevance.” McConachie cites Bigsby’s observation that international critics have viewed U.S. drama as “probably the major world drama” of the second half of the 20th

century, yet “departments of English, theater and American studies in this country rarely treat our theater with a similar level of seriousness” (McConachie 265). In production, the most urgent statements are often cloaked in classical robes; director Ethan McSweeney’s 2006 staging of *The Persians* at Washington’s Shakespeare Theatre Company was largely viewed in the context of U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan; critic Philip Kennicott reported:

[Adaptor Ellen] McLaughlin’s script was commissioned by Tony Randall for his National Actors Studio just as the war in Iraq started. McLaughlin has taken immense liberties with the text, adding, editing and interpolating, even inventing a scene in which Xerxes is comforted by his mother. She indulges in the sentimentality of antiwar literature, the youth of the victims, the arrogance of the leaders. At a preview last week, knowing glances and titters were exchanged in the audience when her text hammered away at the idea that Xerxes is an undeserving, arrogant, incompetent scion on his father – a scene that Maureen Dowd might have written about the Bush clan. Words like ‘barbarian,’ casually thrown around in other versions, have disappeared from her text. And McLaughlin explicitly echoes the great antiwar poet Wilfred Owen when the herald says that he has seen war, and “the pity of it” (Kennicott).

The same spirit informed Charles Mee’s *Iphigenia 2.0*, produced in New York (2007) and Chicago (2012), and director Lisa Peterson’s widely-produced adaptation with actor Denis O’Hare of Homer’s *The Iliad*, which the creators titled *An Iliad*. In a 2012 interview with *The Daily Beast*, O’Hare was asked, “Surely there’s a message you

wanted to send”; he replied, “We started this back in 2005 when Lisa was looking for a way to reflect on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and she felt contemporary playwrights weren’t responding.” O’Hare quickly added to the repertoire of reflexive anti-political performances, mitigating his own visa as he stated:

Lisa’s not a political person, she doesn’t look for a platform to promote her ideas. My motivation is more clear-cut. I’m completely antiwar, and I find it horrifying that in this culture I’m now a minority voice. *The Iliad* is about a war 1,200 years ago that solved nothing and achieved nothing. Most of our wars achieve very little. But whatever agenda I have gets buried in a work this great. If you’re being honest, you realize that as an artist, you’re not a policy maker (Kaplan).

The crisis can be seen afflicting even theater companies committed to new plays. In 2009, Washington’s progressive Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company organized and hosted “Theatre, Democracy and Engagement,” a conference with such national participants as longtime P.S. 122 and Under the Radar festival artistic director Mark Russell, playwright/theorist Erik Ehn, and writer-performer Nilaja Sun (*No Child*). The project was aimed in part at Woolly Mammoth’s self-scrutiny regarding political valence:

A year ago, as we looked ahead to our 30th season, we started to frame a new set of goals for Woolly Mammoth’s next three decades. Having put our traditional education programming (theatre classes and outreach initiatives) on hiatus, we pondered the irony that Woolly Mammoth, one of the more provocative theatres in America, is located in the heart of the nation’s capital. Could our work connect

more directly with the civic discourse that happens within blocks of our theatre every day? Would this lead to a deeper kind of engagement with our community? If playwrights knew that their work would actually be *discussed* by policy makers, scholars, students, and citizens from diverse backgrounds – would it affect the kinds of plays they write? Could we make a case for the value of theatre as an essential tool of democracy, rather than allowing ourselves to be marginalized as another form of entertainment? (from the Woolly Mammoth press release, italics in original).

The questions are posed nationally at the beginning of the decade in a *Theater and Social Change* issue of *Theatre*. Editor Erika Munk nervously notes in her Sept. 25, 2001 preface that the issue's essays and interviews were "written a year ago and immutably laid out three months ago" (Munk 1). Alisa Solomon's introduction makes a brief but dire observation regarding the issue's content:

How striking, though, that there's no discussion of playwrights. One can hardly imagine a work like *Far Away* emerging on these shores. We lack a cadre of writers like [Britain's Caryl] Churchill who do not regard deep, defiant political thinking as somehow standing in the way of their transcendent artistic process and individual genius (Solomon 4).

In the same issue, the article "How Do You Make Social Change?" collects short essays by multiple theater-makers; writer-performer Holly Hughes writes, "I'm afraid that saying you're in favor of a politically engaged theater – fuck, politically engaged art of

any kind – marks you as part of the lunatic fringe in this country” (72). Kushner’s response includes his familiar complaint about the critical predilection to privilege psychology over politics, but he also identifies the anti-political habitus *vis a vis* dramatists grappling with the topical: “Plays that seem soiled by an obsession with the immediate and the contemporary, the changeable and the confusing, are often punished; the future, the Unborn, will not want to see such plays, and the rights and interests of the Unborn must be carefully protected” (63).

The fault line reaches notable depths in “American Theatres Reflect on the Events of September 11” (in the Winter 2002 *Theatre*). The baseline questions directed to artists by a panel of journalists are striking: “Do you think theaters should respond to these events directly and immediately? If not, why? If so, do you believe theater has, or had, or will have an influential political voice in the United States?” (Grinwis 1). This handwringing is dispiritingly weak: the frame is not *how* the American theater should use its political voice, but whether it even *has* one. The artists respond in kind. Public Theatre artistic director Oskar Eustis, an early collaborator on *Angels*, reports that some in the theater community suggested that going forward with Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* would be “inappropriate,” but that “I couldn’t be happier” to have a “multi-dimensional” representation of Afghans and Islam (Grinwis 2). (*Homebody* proved once and for all that Kushner, vastly more so than any U.S. dramatist, conscientiously probes for the immediate political pulse. The play begins with the monologue of a curious British housewife and mother – the Homebody – who impulsively travels to Kabul and disappears there. The long, complicated remainder dramatizes the husband’s and daughter’s search for her, an intercultural religious-political investigation giving voice to

the tensions that had been little explored in popular culture and on the stage prior to 2001. *Homebody* had already been announced for a December premiere at the Public at the time of the attacks.) In a sentiment that Kushner had already disputed in his “protect the Unborn” statement, Eustis then muses on the potential for “metaphorical response” via such classics as *The Persians*, *Medea*, and *The Skin of Our Teeth*: “Plays are always read through our present moment. But it’s much too soon to know what our present moment is” (Grinwis 2). Whether one terms Eustis’s position as tempered or tepid, it certainly sends playwrights a signal to expect limited horizons from one of the foremost gatekeepers in the theater: how, a dramatist may wonder, can one write about a present moment that, according to producers, one cannot know? Yet even Eustis’s caution is outdone by the wholesale aversion to politics articulated by many artists in the “special issue” (itself a barometer of restricted visas and a habitus that categorizes the topical as exceptional). “Ambulance-chasing” is the term for political art from a member of the troupe Collapsible Giraffe, who adds, “Frankly, who gives a fuck what a bunch of self-centered theater faggots have to say?” (Grinwis 4). John Collins of the performance group Elevator Repair Service says, “It minimizes and diminishes theater when you use it to communicate your political ideas” (Grinwis 15). The tenor is bluntly reductive and self-marginalizing as practically none of the artists interviewed offer anything resembling positive purpose regarding politics and their art.

A notable exception is Anna Deavere Smith:

We tend to say now that this has happened we are going to lose our civil liberties, but the question is, were we squandering them when we had them, or using them to say bold things? . . . How prepared is our army of artists? How much do

schools like New York University or Yale value the role of artists to promote social change? (Grinwis 5).

Smith, of course, is not precisely a playwright, although understanding that the title is contested, she fully claims it in *Talk to Me* (2000), asserting that “A playwright makes plays” (198). Nonetheless, Smith hails from a realm that validates, virtually without question, the visas of artists staging the topical/political, a realm that has proliferated in the post-*Angels/Fires* period: the realm of documentary. Smith has proven to be demonstrably more influential than Kushner, making visible a previously under-exploited space for political work on the American stage. But it is worth reaffirming at the outset that while Smith herself is *sui generis*, documentary forms significantly predate her own brand of “verbatim” theater. Derek Paget recovers a deep line of nearly lost performance histories in his essay “The ‘Broken Tradition’ of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance,” invoking Stourac and McCreery and charting the earlier documentary-based works of Piscator, the FTP’s Living Newspapers, and Paget’s own seminal experience viewing the 1963 *Oh, What a Lovely War* and its “cocktail of non-naturalistic theatrical devices” (Forsyth 225). Paget persuasively reminds us that documentary modes hardly arrived newborn on stages only as of the late 1980s, contrary what he experiences as a critical vogue to proclaim so in naïve journalistic circles. To be fair, many journalists are responding to a form that is still establishing its compact with audiences. KJ Sanchez, co-creator and director of the documentary *Re-Entry* (2010), reports that when the play was performed at Baltimore’s Center Stage, “We had to be

very, very clear with audiences that it is interviews, because a lot of people had not seen that style before” (Sanchez).

Even so, documentary has very recently become so widespread that distinctive sub-strains have gained currency – verbatim, tribunal theater, theater of testimony, memoir, etc. – and in-depth studies are beginning to emerge. Co-editors Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson undertake a useful survey with *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009), describing their mission as “To re-evaluate the historical traditions of documentary theater and to examine the remarkable mobilization and proliferation of documentary forms across Western theater cultures in the past two decades” (Forsyth 1). Reinelt, in Carol Martin’s *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010), characterizes the increase in documentary productions as “widely acknowledged,” and suggests the Tricycle Theatre’s tribunal play *The Colour of Justice: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (1999) as a probable turning point in popularity. Indeed, its validation ran deep: *The Guardian* declared, “‘The Colour of Justice’ is the most vital piece of theater on the London stage” (Clapp). The play was quickly adapted into a noteworthy television presentation, and Reinelt suggests that David Hare’s unequivocal praise for *Colour of Justice* was influential (one of Hare’s own documentary projects, *Via Dolorosa*, was also appearing at the time). The contemporary British body of documentary work, a volume that certainly qualifies as a wave, begins with Hare and with the Tricycle’s tribunal plays, condensed from court records by journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, but it also includes works by Robin Soans, Alecky Blyth, and Gregory Burke.

In the United States, the current movement dates at least as far back as the 1980s and to the narratively animated, psychologically introspective but essentially fact-based personal monologues of Spalding Gray,⁴⁸ which emerged with the “theater of testimony” works of Emily Mann (notably *Execution of Justice* [1984], which used public records as it reconstructed the events around the 1978 murder of San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone). Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1991) was arguably the documentary equivalent of *Angels* in terms of critical acclaim, in terms of elevating its creator to brand-name status, and in terms of exceptional penetration of the theatrical consciousness. (*Fires*, like *Colour of Justice*, *Via Dolorosa*, and *Angels*, became a TV film, directed by George C. Wolfe and telecast on PBS.) *Fires* was quickly followed by more documentary works that were unusually well-received on American stages, among them Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles*, 1992, Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, the Tectonic Theatre Project’s *The Laramie Project*, Doug Wright’s *I Am My Own Wife*, and Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen’s *The Exonerated*. Tectonic artistic director Moises Kaufman observed at the end of 2010, “These are works that over the last decade have been among the most performed plays in America” (Kaufman); at the same time, *New York Times* critic Jason Zinoman noted, “The vital energy behind political theater these days is based in reality” (Zinoman “When News Events”).

Postmodern issues with “the real” persist, of course, even in this apparently most realistic of modes. Martin is substantially distracted by the problem of inescapable subjectivity, writing, “The paradox of a theater of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship to the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable

theater,” a line she continues by lumping the contested ethics of television docudramas into the suddenly suspect mix (Martin 23). The issue, while valid, is far from crippling, and not one of which practitioners are unaware. Gray was a blatantly, mischievously unreliable narrator; so, more recently and not altogether reluctantly, is the flamboyant muckraking storyteller Mike Daisey (*The Last Cargo Cult, How Theater Failed America, The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*). Kaufman and Tectonic take pains to be narratively transparent in *The Laramie Project*, with the actors “playing” themselves as concerned artists interviewing the citizens of Laramie, Wyoming about the events surrounding the beating death of Matthew Shepard. The New York City troupe The Civilians frequently converts company-conducted interviews not only into dramatic scenes but also into the aggressively non-naturalistic form of songs (Michael Friedman is the house composer). These artists and more work in a Brechtian spirit that foregrounds process and presentation, acknowledging and interrogating the act of mediation while retaining a deep interest in storytelling and empathy. Kaufman says,

When people talk about documentary theater, I have a specific answer: a lot of documentaries operate on the assumption that These Are The Facts. With Tectonic, what we are saying is, No, these are *not* the facts. These are *texts* that we have gathered, and we as artists are the prism by which you are watching it. That is why we always present the writers. We don’t want you to forget that this is mediated by writers and actors and artists, people who have a point of view (Kaufman).

Though Smith's emotional, mimicry-driven verbatim solo performances are vastly different from the Tectonic ensemble's cool, dry reportorial deliveries, Smith says something essentially the same in terms of "the real":

In France, rehearsal is *repetition*. Repeating. Every time you repeat something, even as you try-to-do-what-it-was, more of you comes in it. Right? So I go back and I listen to something again,⁴⁹ and I go, No, that's not really what it was. So always in that process, I don't get to that place, and maybe I shouldn't be getting to that place, because if we really wanted that place, we'd just show the video. So somewhere, the audience is expecting that my humanity, um, is in it. My interpretation is in it (Smith 2009).

Forsyth and Megson suggest that this instability is fundamentally accepted within documentary practice, writing, "The once-trenchant requirement that the documentary form should necessarily be equivalent to an unimpeachable and objective witness to public events has been challenged in order to situate historical truth as an embattled site of contestation" (Forsyth 3). Reinelt likewise addresses the issue of unstable reality, and of the "slippery slope" of any "creative treatment." "Positivist faith in empirical reality led to assumptions about the truth value of documents that began to come apart in postmodernity," she writes, adding, "Arguments about the purity or contamination of the document/ary have since needlessly obfuscated the recognition that an examination of reality and a dramatization of its results is in touch with the real but not a copy of it" (Reinelt "Promise" 8). Reinelt cites film theorist Stella Bruzzi as reinforcement that audiences are not without agency and intellect: "The Spectator [sic] is not in need of

signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other,” and, in league with documentary practitioners, Reinelt argues that theoretical contests regarding “the real” have practical limits:

Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand. This does not mean they expect unmediated access to the truth in question, but that the documents have something significant to offer. The promise of documentary at this level is to establish a link between spectators’ quest and an absent but acknowledged reality. If we want to understand the minimal claim of the documentary, it is simple facticity: the indexical value of documents is the corroboration that something happened, that events took place (Reinelt “Promise” 9-10).

A key to understanding the documentary forms is the centrality of the “document” (which takes many forms – interview, court record, memoir, etc.), as distinct from the text; the document conveys the “facticity” Reinelt describes, and also delivers the work’s fundamental truth claim. It is by nature rooted in the public square, which certainly contributes to its appeal and efficacy as a political vessel. It is worth remembering that much of Taylor’s “archive and repertoire” theory is based not on texts, or even art, but on history and actions analyzed as cultural performances. That helps explain Martin’s invocation of Taylor *viz.* documentary forms: “Documentary theater takes the archive and turns it into repertory, following a sequence from behavior to archived records of

behavior to the restoration of behavior as public performance” (Carol Martin 18). That is also Schechnerian language, of course – the “twice-behaved” that is characteristic of performance. “As twice-behaved behavior,” Martin writes, “documentary theater self-consciously blends into and usurps other forms of cultural expression such as political speeches, courts of law, forms of political protest, and performance in everyday life” (Martin 19). Reinelt notes Martin’s six functions of documentary drama – to reopen trials, create additional historical accounts, reconstruct an event, etc. – that “point to documentary theater’s underlying predication on a viable public sphere” (Reinelt “Promise” 11). In this analysis, the documentary is not reluctantly but almost *necessarily* political, springing as it does from event, testimony, public record. It is born with a visa.

A strong case can be made for Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* as the watershed work that catapulted documentary toward its current prominence on U.S. stages, beginning with the fact that it inspired a popular and influential body of work the like of which Kushner’s *Angels* cannot claim; typical is Brantley’s comment reviewing the New York premiere of *Laramie*: “The production’s translation of transcribed interviews and documents may directly recall the methods of the performance artist Anna Deavere Smith” (Brantley “A Brutal Act”). *Fires* is still virtually unique for its immediacy; it is composed of interviews Smith conducted within days of the riots in Crown Heights. That conflict erupted after a rabbi’s motorcade struck a young black boy, Gavin Cato, a disaster that was swiftly followed by the wildly retaliatory stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum, a Hassidic Jew who became the unfortunate target of street rage being vented by blacks who understood Cato’s killing, and the unsatisfactory police response, as an inflammatory emblem of persistent racial discrimination. Smith was already

experienced in creating works around public conflict, having delivered commissions within several university contexts, but this was the first play that ghosted such a widely known incident, a devastating and perplexing race riot that commanded headlines nationally. It was also the first time Smith reached audiences across the country via her own virtuoso performances as she toured widely and eventually starred in the televised production.

The authority of *Fires* derived not only from the truth claim of Smith's firsthand reportage, a technique that has been widely used in stage projects before and since. It was also earned through Smith's choice to perform verbatim, using her subjects' words as precisely as possible as she played an impressive range of figures that included the Rev. Al Sharpton, activist Angela Davis, *Ms. Magazine* founder Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Lubavitcher Rabbi Joseph Spielman, Crown Heights Youth Collective director Richard Green, the father of Gavin Cato and the brother of Yankel Rosenbaum – men, women, black people, white people, secular individuals, Jewish figures. As in Smith's subsequent riot study, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, with *Fires* Smith assayed the role of theater artist as first responder, plunging into the fray and emerging with front-line information. Her gifts as a mimic were widely praised as she undertook to replicate the variety of speech patterns and idiosyncratic mannerisms with the precision of a linguist, which is how Smith frequently describes the genesis and continued pursuit of her project.⁵⁰ Further power derives from the metaphor of the single figure embodying a disparate multitude: Smith performs barefoot, which she believes is emblematic of walking in someone else's words. She explains, "I think me playing these opposite points of view suggested that if one person can embody it, then people should *possibly* be able to step aside from the

point of view for a moment, to hear what somebody else has to say” (Smith 2009). (The emphasis, here and in all quotations drawn from interviews with Smith, is hers, as spoken.) Amplifying her approach to making and performing the plays, addressing the document and subjectivity, Smith says,

The verbatim part, for me, isn’t because I want the words to be evidence; they end up being that, you know, when the play is made, and if the play has social and political relevance, which is important to me from another point of view entirely. But in terms of my works as an actor, I am verbatim. I am attempting to be verbatim inasmuch as I want to really find from the study of words the actual intention of that person. What are they really trying to tell me on this earth, in the course of that hour? *That’s* why it’s verbatim, for me, is I want to *know* . . . what they’re trying to do. Has *their* heart been broken? What brought them together? And then hopefully by doing that I can give the audience a kiiiind of a sense of that person. But different – ‘cause it’s always me. A kiiiind of a sense of that person uh, that I had, and maybe a kind of sense of them that they might not actually have if they were to sit with them, because it’s also me doing an interpretation.

Fires, couple with the near-immediate follow-up *Twilight*, established Smith as a unique and striking performer, but it also made her an intellectual and political star, catapulting her to projects with Harvard and New York Universities that created the Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue and Anna Deavere Smith Works (with funding from the Ford Foundation). Smith’s political credibility was so strong that in the mid-

1990s she undertook a long project on the presidency called *House Arrest*, conducting research in Washington and interviewing hundreds of people, eventually including President Bill Clinton. The creative gaze and inside access recall Hare and *Absence of War*, and the similarity was furthered on the occasion of the premiere production at Washington's Arena Stage, when the play was performed not solo by Smith but by a comparatively large cast. (On opening night, Smith made a surprise appearance as Clinton, whom she had interviewed earlier that very day.) Smith's increasingly visible and ambitious work in the 1990s claimed broad visa powers and dramatically expanded the horizon of expectations for documentary theater as political theater in America, due in no small part to the new critical habitus that routinely greeted her "document"-based work not as lecturing, hectoring or propaganda, but as objective, neutral, balanced – "qualities" that the more transparently scripted political play is, according to the habitus, perpetually lacking. "Her lack of bias is astonishing," David Finkle wrote in summary of her solo works as he reviewed *Talk to Me*. "Remarkably free of cant and polemics . . . her journalistic balance remains perfectly pitched," Frank Rich wrote in his *New York Times* review of *Fires* (Rich "Diversities"). That receptive tone is not limited to Smith's works: Brantley praised the neutrality of *The Exonerated*, another theatrical "document," with such phrases as "modesty," "no reek of piety or creak of didacticism," "reminding you that real life has a way of coming up with resonant metaphors, grotesque ironies and cruel coincidences that no dramatist would dare invent" (Brantley, "Someone Else").

A series of interviews conducted with this project in mind found documentary theater makers confirming a reception to documentary work that includes sense of expanded political license. Director KJ Sanchez and actress Emily Ackerman interviewed

U.S. soldiers returning to civilian life after deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan for their project, *Re-Entry*; of the license conferred by documentary, Sanchez says, “Legitimizing is definitely the best way to put it, especially when the topic is so far away from your own personal experiences.” Ackerman suggests that being fact-based helps the artists succeed in potentially contested territory: “The kind of stuff we do, we can – not *hide* behind, but we have the *shield*, you know, of *They Said It*.” Sanchez and Ackerman recorded interviews for *Re-Entry*, and Ackerman explains how this differs from Civilians practice, in which (at least in early works) actors typically listen to subjects without recording, then perform from memory, a process which foregrounds the performers as what Ackerman describes as a “filter.” The military subjects of *Re-Entry*, however, were suspicious (a self-protective wariness bordering on belligerence that Burke also experienced and dramatizes in *Black Watch*), compelling Sanchez and Ackerman to resort to recording, and then taking the verbatim approach in performance. This, Sanchez says, “allowed people to accept” their representations of the complexities of soldiers transitioning back into society. Sanchez says, “The response from the military was, ‘I can’t believe you captured the real thoughts and feelings,’ and we said, ‘We took it from transcripts.’” Kaufman echoes the positive reception and expanded license/visa bestowed upon “the real,” of documentary as a kind of armor: “Yes, I think it proposes a different contract with the audience. If I am a fiction writer I couldn’t do it because truth is so much more daring than fiction. Nobody would believe it, but because it’s true, nobody can challenge it. It is what it is.” Kaufman contends that a visa would be denied to any dramatist who might have “invented” the pathos-laden speech of forgiveness delivered by

Matthew Shepard's father at the end of *Laramie*, "But that's what he did. Nobody can complain about the narrative twist and turns that reality takes."

Smith suggests that one explanation for this flight of the topical/political into "the real" is a crisis of confidence, certainly among the young, trained literati who largely constitute the playwriting community in the U.S., regarding who has license to speak for whom. The delicacy of that sensitivity may be crippling to dramatists. Smith's reply to the dilemma of visa – posed to her, as to all of the subjects interviewed in this section, in terms of "license" – is worth quoting in full:

The kids who write to me, and the kids who pop up and ask me questions, are people who have been educated in an academy that has complicated its discourse. And they are overwhelmed about what's what. They have questions about responsibility. They, particularly the white men, are a little bit nervous about if they have the license to write about a black woman. Even a genius like Tony Kushner talked to me before *Caroline, or Change* – or while he was working on it, was concerned. I think *Caroline, or Change* is extraordinary, what he has done to inhabit the voice and body of a black woman. But for a period of time, people are terrified to write about anything that's not them. Where would we be if Tennessee Williams was totally out [of the closet]? Where would we be if Ibsen had not written Nora? But for a time, people will not, even though – 'Write about what you know.' A man won't write about a woman, a white person's scared to write about a black person, Asian person – they can't imagine a world other than their own. So then what are they going to do? They're going to go to the real world to find real evidence, and then they have license to speak *as* somebody else.

Right? But what would be real interesting about my work, and to me – one of the actors on *Nurse Jackie*, Paul Schulze [who is white], wants to do *Let Me Down Easy*. And I always wanted a white male to do *Fires in the Mirror*. Always wanted to do it back to back [Smith's performance/a white male's performance], to see who would get away with what.

I've never been asked your question, so you have to forgive me for my storminess, but I think that some of what you're trying to get at about this explosion of this stuff has to do with a kind of an unresolved timidity and an unresolved anxiety about who can speak for who. And I actually don't have that anxiety. And it's not because, you know, uh, because I presume this sort of confidence of an author. It's more that I have faith that my curiosity will outweigh my presumptuousness. *And* because I have the cooperation of most of the people who I'm talking to. And as I've said before, if I have 320 interviews that I do in this case, I'm only looking for the things that people will go to a mountaintop and scream. And I just happen to be there. And that's my license, is that I just happen to be there.

Sanchez reinforces Smith's theory when she answers a question about possibly writing a "fictional" play, returning several times to the idea of limitation and anxiety: "Then I'm only using my own perspective and agenda, and that bores me to tears"; "I just know that for myself it [fiction] limits me in terms of what kind of stories I can tell;" "[I can] get behind the eyes and under the skin of some who has a different perspective and thinks way differently than I did."

The body of work created in the U.S. post-*Fires* demonstrates that the documentary form and its variants have begun to provide a reliable safe haven for the political. Yet even where “the real” is coupled with the blatantly political, the theater’s formidable anti-political habitus sometimes still gains the upper hand. As *The Civilians* interviewed protestors of the Occupy Wall Street movements gathering material for a project, artistic director Steve Cosson told the *Washington Post*, “With this approach, it’s an opportunity to understand the situation from a real, human, first-person point of view, and in more than 30 seconds . . . And what’s exciting about this particular movement is that, at the moment, it’s still coming together. It’s compelling because it’s not boiled down to a list of demands just yet” – another way of privileging psychology over politics. Peter Marks followed actor Greg McFadden searching for subjects; McFadden, too, recoiled from the political essence of the Occupy participants. Marks wrote, “He [McFadden] was, in a sense, conducting auditions himself, for a character that he might play. ‘I want a human being, not a soapbox,’ he said. He paused to talk to a woman who was perched on a low-slung wall, but lost interest after she told him she was ‘sort of the Norma Rae of my neighborhood’” (Marks “Occupy”).

The increasing presence of the documentary certainly has not resolved the crisis of political language/visa for playwrights; in fact, the option of working within “the real” may only be serving to harden the habitus against fictitious political representations on the stage. Reinelt writes, “The hypertheatricalization of contemporary culture can itself lead toward a valorization and desire for ‘facts,’ for the materiality of events, for a brute display of evidence as a reaction against the fear of total fiction when all else fails” (“Poetics” 81). Hare has expressed the same idea: “‘Is this true? Is this a true story?’ is a

question you hear asked frequently in cinemas. Before a film a message regularly appears: ‘This is based on a true story.’ This functions as a kind of prophylactic, a way of protecting the subsequent proceedings from undue criticism” (Hare, “Mere Fact”).

The significance of this faith and pressure on the document, from artists and audiences alike, is evident in an under-recognized factor in the most publicized controversy to date over an American “documentary” production, Mike Daisey’s *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*. Daisey, a monologist, gravitated toward solo performing in the late 1990s because, he said, “I wanted to do theater that I can control the variables of.” (Except as noted, all quotations from Daisey are from an interview with the author in June 2012.) His body of work, reality-based monologues that typically combine research and flamboyant first-persona experiences and narrative, squarely places him in the muckraking tradition, yet Daisey contends that if Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* now it would be ignored precisely because it is fiction. This anxiety about Reinelt’s “fear of total fiction” can be viewed as a habitus-induced resort to “the real”; though it was little noted in the greater public outrage over being deceived, Daisey several times admitted to a horizons-of-expectations anti-fiction pressure. The public radio program *This American Life* broke the news that despite the fact that Daisey actually had conducted interviews and gathered data at Foxconn’s China plant in Shenzhen, significant portions of the billed-as-real *Steve Jobs* had been sensationalized and exaggerated. That revelation was, by the theater world’s measures, an instant and sizable scandal, and as Daisey was interrogated (a word that captures the flavor of the outraged public questioning), he repeatedly made difficult-to-parse special claims for something he labeled “theatrical reality.” The excruciating dead air allowed by *This*

American Life host Ira Glass as he cross-examined Daisey was Daisey's own trapped silence, his inability to articulate clearly – particularly in the face of affronted journalists – why he felt he was entitled to misrepresent facts simply because he was on a stage. The swift response from the theatrical community was to assemble panels (pointedly excluding Daisey, an almost instantaneous pariah) on the definitional limits of documentary forms.

Daisey's struggles to explain his work's relationship to "the real" surfaced again in a previously scheduled appearance at Georgetown University two days after the initial Saturday broadcast of the *This American Life* episode, according to tweeted reports by *Washingtonian* critic-reporter Sophie Gilbert: "I am troubled by the way fiction works. By how toothless it seems in this age . . . I am also really allergic at this point to labeling what my stuff is," he said. Already, the exposed fictions that Daisey had built into *Steve Jobs* made it impossible to label the piece as "true," and of course it was the truth claim of the performance that had made the work so popular and influential that it had begun to transcend theatrical circles. *Steve Jobs* had been such a success at Washington's Woolly Mammoth in 2011 that the theater had already announced a return engagement for the summer of 2012; in January 2012 Daisey was a guest on HBO's political chat-and-joke show *Real Time* with Bill Maher, and obviously he had caught the attention of *This American Life*, during which Daisey performed long portions of *Steve Jobs* (Glass's cross-examination of Daisey was on a subsequent broadcast, titled *Retraction*). As the scandal broke, *Steve Jobs* was playing in an extended run at the Public Theatre in New York. *The Washington Post*'s Peter Marks, in a revealing Twitter exchange on Jan. 26, 2012 with Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times*, even recommended Daisey for the

highest of journalistic honors before the scandal broke. Marks was responding to a lengthy, highly detailed Jan. 25, 2012 *New York Times* business article, “In China, Human Costs Are Built into an iPad,” by Charles Duhigg and David Barboza, which chronicled the often “harsh conditions,” “onerous work environments and serious – sometimes deadly – safety problems” for laborers piecing together high-tech products exported around the world (Duhigg). Marks linked the article for his followers and asked on Twitter, “Can playwright win Pulitzer for investigative reportng [sic]? MT @PublicTheatreNY Daisey’s #AgonyEcstasy: NYT on Apple in China nyti.ms/wijNHP.” The suggestion, if puffed by critical excitement, was not without gravity, as Marks has served on Pulitzer committees for drama. Marks’s follow up: “If year’s most important piece of journalism is a play, shouldn’t Pulitzers take note?”

That such a claim could be made for any theatrical work was remarkable, but Zinoman immediately took issue: “I think you are overstating. One need not knock journalists, who have covered this story for years, to celebrate this play.” A brief dialogue followed:

MARKS. Wasn’t knocking journos, God knows. Been one for 35 years! But can’t we acknowledge Daisey has focused attention in exciting way?

ZINOMAN. Yes, and we can do it without saying he broke news. Or that the NYT ‘followed’ when . . .

ZINOMAN (in a new tweet). this was some heroic boots-on-the-ground reporting (in difficult conditions), the kind that reminds us what journalists do well.

MARKS. But Daisey’s been doing this play for a year, Jason. It’s not a knock to say I haven’t seen it covered with this kind of vigor by NYT be4.

Concluding, Zinoman chose a conciliatory middle position: “That said, i do think much of the press has been slow to cover this. And MD [Mike Daisey] has shown how vital political theater can be.” Marks: “I agree!”

In subsequent months no one would criticize Daisey more harshly than Zinoman, and any celebration of the new vitality of political theater was postponed, if not canceled outright. Obviously Daisey’s deception was/is not justifiable, but his choices are informative here as evidence of a habitus that operates so forcefully against conventional political playwriting that it strangulates any manifestation of such stage language. During a long interview three months after the *Steve Jobs* scandal, Daisey offered an aside about the problem of performance and representation, saying, “Because as a monologist you’re always being accused by some people of, ‘YOU SHARE SO MUCH.’ They always call it ‘self-indulgent,’ but that’s just a Puritan dodge in our culture because we can’t stand it when people actually tell their stories.” He added that monologists who include first person material also face accusations of narcissism: “Which is always so funny, because it’s like, ‘But it would be so much more valid if you talk about someone else.’ Until you do too much! Then you’re ‘appropriating their stories.’ So really what we’re saying is, we wish you would not speak. That’s really what we’re saying.”

Daisey’s statement unquestionably savors of sour grapes, yet the experience is demonstrably wide, a habitus that makes the forbidding reception Daisey describes commonplace. “To be a political playwright in the United States is to be censored – financially,” playwright Karen Malpede wrote in a 2012 essay (Malpede). Playwright Lee Blessing, the lone American among the dozen writers of the British Tricycle Theatre’s *Great Game: Afghanistan* cycle, said as the plays came to the U.S. in 2010, “Writers

make little enough as it is. So they have to have an eye on what will be produced.”

Blessing added that the *Great Game* playwrights received this guidance from director Nicholas Kent: “Don’t be afraid to fictionalize” (Blessing).

Reinelt writes, “Documentary theater is often politically engaged; although its effects may not match its intentions, it does summon public consideration of aspects of reality in a spirit of critical reasoning” (“Promise” 12). We can accept this while asking whether documentary forms hold the exclusive visa to that realm, or whether dramatists who choose fiction may continue to hope for a safe passage. It is difficult to be optimistic when such figurehead writers as Mamet (even before his increasingly controversial apostasy, inflamed further by a pro-gun essay in January 2013 [Mamet “Gun Laws”]), subvert the claim. Contrasting himself with Arthur Miller, Mamet has said,

He sees writing as a tool of conscience. His stuff is informed by the driving idea that theater is a tool for the betterment of social conditions . . . I just write plays. I don’t think my plays are going to change anybody’s social conditions. I think Mr. Miller’s always thought, and it’s a great thought, that his plays might alter people’s feelings about real contemporary events. My view is very, very different because we’re different people from different generations. I think the purpose of theater, as Stanislavski said, is to bring to the stage the life of the soul. That may or may not make people more in touch with what’s happening around them and may or may not make them better citizens (Kane 73-4).

The mitigation against the playwright as thinker – to say nothing of the playwright as political thinker – is practically completed by the demeaning working conditions of

mandatory “development” described by so many playwrights⁵¹ and encapsulated a much-discussed 2007 lecture by playwright Richard Nelson, then the chair of the Department of Playwriting at the Yale School of Drama:

The profession of playwright, the role of the playwright in today’s American theater, I believe, is under serious attack . . . ‘Help.’ ‘Playwrights are in need of help.’ This is now almost a maxim in our theater today. Unquestioned. A given. But where does this mindset – for that is what it is, a mindset – come from? Of course playwrights need things – money, productions, support, encouragement. So do actors, directors, designers, artistic directors. But THIS mindset is different, because what is meant here is: ‘Playwrights are in need of help – to write their plays.’ ‘They are in need of help – to do their work.’ ‘They can’t do their work themselves.’ . . . How strange. What other profession is viewed in this way? What other person in the theater is viewed this way? Imagine hiring, say, a director with the assumption that he couldn’t do his work himself. . . What is really being said to the playwright by all the help? From the playwright’s perspective it is this: that the given now in the American theater is that what a playwright writes, no matter how much he or she works on it, rewrites it at his or her desk, the play will ALWAYS not be right. Will ALWAYS need ‘help.’ In other words, writing a play is too big of a job for just the playwright to achieve. This, I believe, is now a prevalent attitude in the American theater. And this mindset is devastating (Nelson, emphasis in original).

“We are living in a time when new art works should shoot bullets,” Clifford Odets wrote in 1939 (Odets ix). Arguably it is always so in democracies, where the political direction is potentially reset with every election. Yet it is difficult to see how playwrights, visas repeatedly denied and expectations routinely diminished, can live up to Odets’s maxim when the habitus of the American theater leaves them so systematically disarmed.

Conclusion

In *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Susan Bennett provides an example of the American predilection to downplay or erase politics from the stage. She cites R.G. Davis's "Seven Anarchists I Have Known: American Approaches to Dario Fo," which found that U.S. troupes accentuated comedy and minimized subversion in Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, thereby making a failure of what had been a success in London's West End. "In North America, the depoliticizing at the production stage destroyed the play," Bennett writes (98-99).

When Sam Houston State College presented *Enron* at a regional college theater festival in March 2013, a small group of student critics – well aware of the contrasting reception to the work in London and New York – almost unanimously rejected the performance, describing the piece as melodramatic and marred by one-dimensional greedy villains, even though those over-simplified "villains" often spoke a real financial language so sophisticated that elaborate explanations (and theatrics) were required. A theater professor found the lead "character," Jeffrey Skilling, too psychologically flat, offering Alex in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and Salieri in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* as superior models of unlikable but compelling protagonists. The suggestion

that Lucy Prebble's model was not psychological realism, but perhaps black comedy and/or Brecht, changed no minds.

The same group of students and faculty approved the next performance they saw, Charles Mee's *Iphigenia 2.0*. Like Prebble's *Enron*, it featured breakout singing and dancing to represent a culture – in this instance the military – irrationally exuberant and out of control. As noted earlier, that culture, though unstated, was plainly the U.S. in Iraq, but Mee's play follows Greek form, thus keying an expectation of choral interludes and discursive speeches. The adaptation eventually hews fairly closely to Euripides' plot, but it makes no attempt to explore the roots of the contemporary conflict it purports to explore. The opening speech about the perils of empire is generic. This specificity gap with *Enron* is significant. *Iphigenia 2.0* has the trappings of a critique of American imperialism/expansionism, but it settles for a disapproving attitude rather than analysis; it does not risk an investigation of particulars. It leaves unasked and unanswered the very hard, very real contemporary questions about the role of nation, war, diplomacy and force in the period it evokes.

The difference in reception between the two works is difficult to explain in anything other than terms of timelessness, a perceived attribute of the updated *Iphigenia 2.0* (which in fact was negatively reviewed in its professional Chicago and New York productions) versus timeliness, the Achilles heel of *Enron*. "We already know all this," went a common trope in the *Enron* dismissals, both in the small university setting and in the pivotal New York reception. Asked how she might defend the play from such critiques, *Enron* director Leslie Swackhamer replied, "If you know all this, why aren't you doing anything to stop it?"

Indeed, the decade that began with the Enron scandal ended with a full-blown global financial meltdown. The long financial bubble, glimpsed as early as 1996 when Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan made his observation about “irrational exuberance,” burst in September 2008. Almost immediately, the National Theatre in London took action, commissioning David Hare to research and compose a theatrical response. By October 2009, *The Power of Yes* was on the National’s stage.

Contemporary British playwrights repeatedly cite the empowering influence of Hare and the National, suggesting that a national theater in the U.S. with a similar sense of mission and values – not strictly political, but consistently and unabashedly inclusive of politics – might wield similar positive influence. That is a complex issue for a separate study; the opposition to a national theater in America has hardened with the coast-to-coast rise of non-profit theaters over the past several decades. Meanwhile evidence of the National’s vigorous disposition and Britain’s positive reception continues to accrue; in March 2013, James Graham’s *This House*, a nearly three hour examination of Parliamentary gridlock in 1974, earned an Olivier Award nomination as Best New Play.

The hostilities to the theater that Jonas Barish limns in his history *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* are typically religious, philosophical and moral, but often they are political. At end of his first chapter Barish names the anti-theatricalists’ fear: “Their scared suspicion of the autonomy of art, which persists in eluding exact measurements and exact controls . . . and which, when allowed to be itself, almost invariably tends to cast suspicion on the measurements of the soldiers and the judges” (37). Barish also writes:

There exists a deep reservoir of prejudice which can lend itself to circumstances . . . The true meaning of the prejudice is elusive, but it would seem to have to do with the lifelike immediacy of the theater, which puts it in unwelcome competition with the everyday realm and with the doctrines espoused in schools and churches . . . By the closeness of the imitative process, in which it mimes the actual unfolding of events in time, before the spectators' eyes, it has an unsettling way of being received by its audiences, at least for the moment and with whatever necessary mental reserves, as reality pure and simple. As such, it implicitly constitutes a standing threat to the primacy of the reality propounded from lectern and pulpit (79).

The prejudice in the U.S. is not anti-theatrical but anti-political. In the open society and free market of American democracy, the prejudice is enforced, Kushner justifiably claims, by self-imposed "aesthetic codes." Bourdieu, in *Distinction*, labels this "taste," and identifies the reifying habitus that hardens critical and social responses to culture.

None of this is to argue that contemporary U.S. dramatists must slavishly reanimate the old ghosts, the (varied) interests and (varied) methods of Odets, Miller and Hellman, Brecht, Shaw, Amiri Baraka or Caryl Churchill (though of course some few U.S. dramatists still do steadily assay political subjects and refresh forms, if largely out of the brighter spotlight: see, for instance, the consistently topical works of Kia Corthron). Instead, the suggestion is that a healthy and perhaps even a confident theater culture would not so palpably inhibit artists from freely selecting contentious subjects and the widest possible range of methods. In this study, numerous scholars have refuted the

dogma of formal determinism. Suzan-Lori Parks appears to agree when she writes, “Most playwrights who consider themselves avant-garde spend a lot of time badmouthing the more traditional forms. The naturalism of, say, Lorraine Hansberry is beautiful and should not be dismissed simply because it’s naturalism.” Yet in the next sentence the habitus twitches as Parks writes, “We should understand that realism, like other movements in other art forms, is a specific response to a certain historical climate” (Parks *America* 8). This is a habitus that denies a creative visa, reinforces a suspicious and forbidding horizon of expectations, restricting “legitimate” creative response rather than regarding form (and subjects) as adaptable (by the imaginative) across periods and conditions.

As Hare writes in “Mere Fiction, Mere Fact,” “It as if the doors of our theatre, of their own volition, blow shut all the time, and the task is always to prise them back open.”

Notes

1. It may be argued, of course, that such a quality makes the drama particularly well-tailored for civic and political subjects.

2. Carlson challenges Brook's concept of the empty space as practically non-existent, cites Barthes ("Elements of Semiology") arguing that everything signifies, and writes that "as social beings we structure our intelligible universe according to the semiotic systems of our culture" (133).

3. Manaus is site of a conflict captured in a news photo that Kelleher uses to begin his book.

4. "If all life is political," Kushner wrote, "then politics ceases to exist as a meaningful category; swallowed up by its own universality, it disappears" ("Notes" 22).

5. For a comprehensive study of European workers' theaters at their zenith, including much on the pioneering and limitations of dramaturgical methodologies and the problematic role of writers, see Stourac and McCreery's *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917-1934*. More on this work in Chapter Three.

6. The pinnacle, but by no means the sum, of the Hellman controversies was likely her 1980 libel lawsuit against Mary McCarthy, who, on *The Dick Cavett Show*, remarked that even "and" and "the" were lies coming from Hellman (Rollyson 512).

7. The role was played by the lifelong activist actor Vanessa Redgrave, in an extremely resonant instance of casting; Redgrave-as-Julia led to one of the most contentious acceptance speeches in Academy Awards history, thanks to the pro-

Palestinian Redgrave's broadside "Zionist hoodlums" description of the political opponents protesting her nomination.

8. See Rollyson's biography, which includes an entire chapter on the "Julia" episode and the critical pushback.

9. The *Angels* subtitle "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" echoes the subtitle of Shaw's similarly catastrophe-themed World War I meditation, *Heartbreak House: A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on National Themes*. For more on Shaw's presence in *Angels*, see Verna Foster's "Anxieties and Influences: The Presence of Shaw in Kushner's 'Angels in America.'"

10. Kushner, while driven by topical and formal challenges, frequently makes it plain that he has an instinct to entertain, and is loathe to write over his audience's head.

Notes, Chapter 2

1. Jauss distinguished between an "internal" horizon of expectations deriving from the text, and an external, or "social," horizon of expectations (Bennett 50).

2. Much of the argument in *Distinction* analyzes and describes social classifications based on study of surveys of French demographics conducted in the 1960s.

3. For more on the practical implications of *Times* notices on programming in and beyond New York, see Todd London's state-of-the-playwright study *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*.

4. "The story of Enron had not, to my knowledge, been given the full-scale theatrical treatment," Brantley wrote, adding – and it seems fair to say "grudgingly" – "You have to admire the chutzpah of Ms. Prebble."

5. Leslie Swackhamer directed *Enron* for Sam Houston State University in 2013, which marked the show's Texan premiere. Swackhamer interviewed Prebble, who confirmed that an aggressive Brechtian approach was her model and her advice (Swackhamer).

6. Typically, big productions opening on Broadway in the spring try to stay open through the Tony Awards in June, which usually provide (or are banked on providing) a promotional boost in sales. The swift demise of the London-acclaimed *Enron* in New York at the peak of Tony season was unusual.

7. Gottfried's analysis does, of course, conform to Aristotle's ranking of the elements of drama: plot, character, thought, if we grant Gottfried an equivalence between "theater" and plot/character. But there is an ever-present risk – another lurking habitus – for critics invoking this hierarchy to create a repeating path that is reductive and prescriptive, rather than observational, as Aristotle was. It risks becoming Neoclassical rules-mongering.

8. In *Political Animals*, Ciaran Hinds plays a southern-raised philandering ex-president whose wife, played by Sigourney Weaver, ran for president and is currently Secretary of State.

9. Akin to Schroeder's example is the hayseed in *Show Boat* who, failing to grasp the convention of representation as he watches a play, fires his gun toward the stage at a fictional villain.

10. It probably should not be forgotten, also, that Boal's description of patronage – funding by state-encouraged subsidies and donations by wealthy patrons – is the dominant economic arrangement today in the U.S. and in European theaters. Contributed

income accounted for 50% of all income, on average, for the 1,807 not-for-profit theaters surveyed in 2010 for Theatre Communications Group's annual Theatre Facts report (TCG).

11. Solomon was a longtime staff theater critic for the *Village Voice*, is on the faculty at the Columbia Journalism School, won the George Jean Nathan Prize for criticism for her book *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*, worked as a dramaturg for Anna Deavere Smith, and co-edited the anthology *Wrestling With Zion: Progressive Jewish-American responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* with Kushner.

12. For more on the cultural primacy of, intellectual challenges to, and hardy resilience of dramatic realism, see the essays in the 1996 *Realism and the American Tradition*, edited by William Demastes.

13. Arena's brain trust of Goldberg, Kinghorn, Hall and Bergquist each departed from the theater over the following few years, at various times and for various reasons.

14. Regarding a widespread financial and programming crisis following the cultural building boom from 1994-2008, during which many arts organizations raised millions and even hundreds of millions of dollars, but often struggled subsequently with debt and compromised missions, see the 2012 study by the University of Chicago, *Set in Stone: Building America's New Generation of Arts Facilities, 1994-2008* (Woronkowicz).

Notes, Chapter 3

1. Finlay Donesky, in *David Hare: Moral and Historical Perspectives* (1996), describes the special relationship: "Even fewer [playwrights] have had their works produced as regularly and lavishly as Hare who appears to have a lock-hold on the

National Theatre, which has produced every play of his since *Knuckle* except *Teeth 'n' Smiles*" (1).

2. Hare's interest in history aligns him with Kushner; another shared foundation might have been Raymond Williams, whose theories Kushner frequently cites (recall that the extravagant subtitle for *Slavs!* is drawn from Williams). Hare studied under Williams at Cambridge, an experience he recalls in his 1989 essay "Cycles of Hope: A Memoir of Raymond Williams." The essay explains, in part, how the young Hare rejected Williams's views and the Marxist analysis of history as it applied to his own youthful goals: "Besides, Cambridge was flirting with something called structuralism, which downplayed the individual's imagination, and insisted that the writer was only a pen. The hand, meanwhile, was controlled largely by the social and economic conditions of the time. This distressing philosophy was not one to cheer the heart of a playwright" (Hare *Writing Left-Handed* 16).

3. Donesky's epigraph for his chapter on Hare's trilogy is drawn from *Major Barbara*:

STEPHEN: It is natural for you to think that money governs England; but you must allow me to think I know better.

UNDERSHAFT: And what does govern England, pray?

STEPHEN: Character, father, character.

UNDERSHAFT: Whose character? Yours or mine?

STEPHEN: Neither yours nor mine, father, but the best elements in the English national character (Donesky 157).

4. Sheridan Morley's review of *Secret Rapture* suggests a further synchronicity between Hare and Kushner that also speaks to the thrust of *Absence of War*; Morley writes that the importance of *Rapture* "lies in the way that he seems uniquely prepared to write of the human cost of current British politics. Among his contemporaries . . . Hare alone relates public to private morality" (Donesky 3).

5. Hare does, however, employ early jokes to warm up audiences; Eyre reports that Hare calls them "bumsettlers" (Boon 146).

6. The observation about combat as a personally sustaining is hardly Hare's alone; see *New York Times* war correspondent Chris Hedges' 2002 confessional chronicle *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.

7. In the U.S., see the unease over the overwhelming volume of advertising during the 2012 general election and the increasing presence of media fact-checkers helping the public navigate the packaging. See also the continuing unease of the Supreme Court's 2010 verdict in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* upholding corporations and other organizations the same rights to free speech, including spending on political advertising that some viewed as accelerating the buying and selling of electoral influence, a 5-4 decision that featured a strongly worded 90 page dissent read in part from the bench by Justice John Paul Stevens. The week before the election, the *New York Times* reported of the super PACs sanctioned by the ruling, "At least 37 such groups, known as 501(c) 4s after a section of the tax code that regulates them, reported political expenditures of close to \$3 million since Oct. 17" (Confessore). Such are the terms by which elections continue to be "fought," to return to Lindsay's defining verb, and reportage of the increasingly dominant role of advertising at all levels proliferated during the 2012 campaign season;

see also, as a single but typical example, “The New Normal: \$9 Million for a Rural House Seat” from *Politico* Nov. 4, 2012 (Vogel).

8. For dramas exploiting the very brink of topicality, see American dramatist Richard Nelson’s Apple Family trilogy, *That Hopey Changey Thing*, *Sweet and Sad*, and *Sorry*. Each is set on a noteworthy date in recent U.S. history, and the plays opened on those dates – Election Day 2010 for *Hopey Changey*, Sept. 11, 2011 for *Sweet and Sad*, Election Day 2012 for *Sorry* – with Nelson working on the script right up to the play’s opening, injecting the latest news and public concerns into the dialogue.

9. This is Michael Billig’s “hot” and “cold” nationalism as described in his 1995 *Banal Nationalism*: cold in the flag display, hot in Welch’s veiled threats and ultimately in his torture of Haynes (Billig).

10. Chicago’s influential Steppenwolf Theatre Company forged its identity as a troupe skilled in heightened reality – realistically based, but able to access exaggerated physical and psychological states – in no small part through early successes with Shepard’s *Action*, *Fool for Love*, and *True West*, the last of which originally starred John Malkovich and Gary Sinise (who directed both *True West* and *Action*) as it became Steppenwolf’s first production to transfer to New York.

11. This allusive, “super-real” method as described by Zinman has been highly influential, visible in the works of Suzan-Lori Parks, Neil LaBute, and others. It is the house style of the vanguard Woolly Mammoth troupe in Washington, D.C., a close kin of Steppenwolf.

12. Mamet’s interest in Aristotle and the Greeks deeply informs both his controversial position on acting – “Show up and say the lines,” he says figuratively and

literally over and over, and his actors can seem strangely affectless, as if masked – and his position on dramatic form, though his view differentiates him sharply from the similarly Greek-influenced Miller. In *Theatre*, Mamet recognizes tragedy and comedy, forms connected to the gods and recognizing the generally hapless state of man in relation to the cosmos, as superior to the less-precise “drama,” which deals with the less significant matter of man’s social relations. Mamet, in an interview with Charlie Rose, described his view of the difference between melodrama and tragedy: “Having been confronted by that capacity to have bad done to us and to do bad ourselves, we leave feeling chastened and, and cleansed, as Aristotle would say, rather than incorrectly buoyed by being reassured, as melodrama does . . . that we are not the bad guy. Melodrama completely differentiates between the good guy and the bad guy and says, ‘You have a choice: the, the evil guy in the black hat, who is a swine or the angel in the white hat, who, who’s a saint. Which would you rather choose?’ we say, ‘I think I’ll identify with the angel in the white hat’ . . . Whereas tragedy says, ‘Choose which one you want to be. Whichever one you choose, you’re going to be wrong, and p.s., you never had a choice to begin with. You’re just human.’ And we leave shaken and perhaps better for the experience” (Kane 181).

13. Noted Miller scholar Christopher Bigsby chronicles Miller’s view that negative critical reception was principally responsible for destroying Tennessee Williams’s later career, “a fact he felt increasingly true of himself” (Bigsby *Miller* 365).

14. The ineffectuality of despair was the basis for Miller’s repeated rejection of the entire category of theater of the absurd, in which man was routinely depicted as hapless and doomed.

Notes, Chapter 4

1. Wood was an early champion of Tennessee Williams, and was his lifelong agent; other clients included Robert Anderson and William Inge.

2. See Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Pleasure," 1975, widely reprinted.

3. J. Ellen Gainor quotes Case on first page of her essay "The Provincetown Players' Experiments with Realism": "Realism, in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as sexual 'Other.' The portrayal of female characters within the family unit . . . makes realism a 'prisonhouse of art' for women" (Gainor 53).

4. See Helene Keyssar's "When Wendy Isn't Trendy"; Keyssar claims a Bakhtinian framework and seeks polyphony, heteroglossia and hybridization as she disapproves of the "narrowness in her vision" and poses such questions as "What if one is poor?" "It is precisely because this play does not re-present the heteroglossia of the world . . . that it is so pleasing to some and so distressing to others" (Barnett 147). It may be worth noting that Bakhtin classified the drama as a monologic form.

5. In 1998 Wasserstein herself would become the single parent of a daughter; the father remained unidentified at the time of her death in 2006.

6. Wasserstein's popular, gently comic, semi-autobiographical Broadway hit, starring Jane Alexander and Madeline Kahn, following *Heidi*.

7. The published version of the play includes Wilks's war paint gesture only as a footnote (81). Apparently this action was not part of any performances until the 2007 Broadway production, the eighth for *Radio Golf*, two years after its 2005 premiere.

8. Aragay's review indicates, in such cases as that of the willfully inscrutable Pinter, interpretive fields without limits: "This central argument [resistance to meaningmaking] dovetails with Begley's professed attitude to the 'lively conversation' that constitutes Pinter studies (4), which 'collectively displays a healthy distrust of semantic reduction and fixity' (26) and where the point of a new contribution 'is not to invalidate earlier interpretations but to examine the hermeneutic crisis surrounding Pinter' (9)" (Aragay).

9. Gray's monologues, eventually popular enough to become successful films (*Swimming to Cambodia*, *Monster in a Box*, *Gray's Anatomy*), began as devised collaborative processes with the Wooster Group (*Three Places in Rhode Island*).

10. To be clear about Smith's preparation: "Go back and listen" is euphemistic, not a strictly accurate description of Smith's latter day process. This interview was conducted in Smith's dressing room at Manhattan's Second Stage for *Let Me Down Easy* in 2009; the dressing room was equipped with large flat screen TVs for Smith to review not merely the vocal inflections but the body language of her subjects – a significant technological upgrade, she explained, from the clunky cassette tape recorders she used when she began her projects in the 1980s.

11. See *Talk to Me* for discussions of iambs, trochees and "verbal undress," indicators of the psychological stresses and surprises that Smith believes reveal character.

All of Smith's monologues, it should be noted, fall under the heading of her overarching project, *On the Road: A Search for the American Character*.

12. See Pressley, "New Plays," and, more expansively, again, London's *Outrageous Fortune*.

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